Mimicry

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Mimicry

by Yuu_chi

Summary

Two years ago, Will put ten bullets into a fanatical copycat killer, adopted his grieving daughter, and set down his pen for good. Now he lives an isolated existence as far away from the spotlight as he can; his life revolves around his bookstore, his daughter, his dogs, and little else. Until a body turns up - another, just like Will wrote about years ago.

The Chesapeake Ripper is evidently a great fan of Will's work - and he's hungry for Will's attention.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Owning a secondhand bookstore had not been Will's lifelong dream.

When he was younger and far less cynical, he'd had ambitions, plans, desires. He was going to change the damn world.

He did not change the damn world. Instead, the damn world changed him.

Par for the course, really. Mostly he's not even bitter about it these days. Life happens regardless of intentions, and he can't rewind time anywhere outside the realm of his own head. He can only move forward, and make the most of what he has.

Besides, it'd be a lie to say he hadn't tasted success, even if he'd chosen to recuse himself from it. For a time, he'd had a measure of worthiness, of stability, and Will can hardly begrudge its natural end. He'd always known that the gifts his talents gave him were not the kind for keeping.

Will is intimately familiar with getting by on whatever grace the universe grants him. It's not everything, maybe, but Will has never expected everything, and as far as he's concerned, it's *enough*.

On Monday morning he rises before the sun, sweat-soaked and nightmare-tired. He feeds the dogs, lets them out into the yard, and then staggers into the shower. He spends a good twenty minutes in there, drifting in and out of awareness as he sags against the slippery walls.

At one point he swears he can see a dark shape rising behind the shower curtain, growing, broadening, consuming the space around it. Will blinks and the hallucination vanishes as if it were never there. He sighs and gets out of the shower.

(He passes by the door to his office on the way to the kitchen and for a moment he allows himself to linger. Gently, he presses his fingertips to the door and tries to gather the courage to open it.

The door remains closed. Will pretends he does not see the dust on the handle where his fingers should be.)

He considers and then summarily discards the notion of breakfast. He brushes his teeth, puts on the same set of clothes that have been living on his bedroom floor since Friday, makes a pretense of dragging a broken-toothed comb through his unruly hair. Never once does he allow himself to glance in the mirror.

Only when he can claim he's made a passable attempt as personhood does he climb into his car and make the hour long drive into Baltimore.

Over the years he's considered moving closer to town to ease the burden of excessive travel time, but he likes the privacy far too much to ever give it up. His nearest neighbour is a good several miles away, and there's plenty of space for his pack who enjoy being cramped inside about as much as Will does.

Whenever Beverly or Abigail push, he says it's for the preservation of his sanity. It'd be funnier if it wasn't so true.

Will's sanity is a tenuous thing even on his best days, and he makes a concentrated effort not to tip himself over the precarious precipice he's toeing the edge of. Self-preservation is not a trait that comes as naturally to Will Graham as it does to others, but he has perfected the fine art of pretending otherwise.

By the time he pulls into the private parking spot out back of his shop, he is just barely approaching functional. It's honestly a leg-up on some of his mornings. It can be a coin toss whether Will wakes up with enough energy to face the world, or whether it's going to be one of those days where the burden the universe places on his shoulders is greater than Will has the strength to shift.

It's cold out, and the shop is like ice when Will shoulders open the door. The heaters splutter, once, twice, but eventually grace him with a gust of stale, warm air. Any day that Will wins a battle with the half-frozen pipes is a good one, and so he allows the victory to lure him into something that anybody else might call a good mood.

By the time Abigail bangs into the shop, Will is more or less ready for the day; floor swept, shelves adjusted, and register balanced. His good mood is flourishing, but when he looks up to offer Abigail a smile he sees the bag in her arms and it promptly fizzles and dies.

"Good morning," she says cheerful, setting the bag atop the counter. "I swung by the post office and picked up your mail."

"Abigail," Will sighs, pinching his nose and knocking his glasses askew.

"Will," she says in return, sugar sweet. A crumpled envelope slips from the top of the bag and flutters to the counter. "You know the post office refuses to throw out your mail. It's got to be claimed."

"Then toss it in the dumpster out back," he hisses. "You know I don't - that it shouldn't - that I don't like seeing it."

"Then throw it out yourself," she says sharply, eyes darkening.

They stare at each other, mouths tight and shoulders taunt. Will can feel the exact moment they both cave, as predictable as clockwork. To call the awkward mess of a relationship between them 'healthy' would be nothing short of outright lying, but they're all either of them have, and their anger is snuffed almost as quickly as it's flared.

"It's been two years," Abigail says, voice gentle. "You know what Doctor Bloom would say."

Will snorts, plucking his glasses from his nose to rub on the hem of his shirt. “Alana would say a great many things, I imagine,” he drawls. “Which is exactly why she’s not my psychiatrist anymore.”

“She’s not your psychiatrist anymore because you refuse to let anybody help you,” Abigail says.

“Did she tell you that?”

“She might not be *your* psychiatrist anymore, but she is mine, and like it or not I’m going to talk about you in our sessions,” Abigail says, completely unapologetic. She plucks the fallen envelope from the bench, stuffing it back into the bag before hoisting it back into her arms. “I’ll toss these out, but next time *pick up your mail.*”

She rounds the bench, disappearing into the staff area. A moment later Will hears the backdoor banging open far too loudly to be anything short of deliberate.

With a shaky sigh he slides his glasses back on. His good mood is nothing but a wistful memory now, but he does his level best to rake in the ashes of it, trying to salvage a degree of functionality if not genuine warmth.

Abigail, he knows, means well, even if she tends to be about as subtle as a bull in a china shop. Perhaps if they put more effort into genuinely learning the nuances of each other instead of stirring up bad memories she might have learnt how to handle Will and his myriad of issues.

A consideration for later, Will thinks, fingers tapping erratically on the benchtop as he looks out across the empty shop. *For now, just get through the day.*

(Will ignores the fact that there never seems to be time for anything *but* ‘getting through the day’; he supposes most people *make* time for other things in life, but it’s a skill that has always eluded him.)

At just past eight, Marissa sweeps in, looking as offended and surly as she always tends to. She barely manages a civil ‘good morning’ to Will before she disappears into the back with Abigail. Will watches her go, more amused than offended. A moment later she slips back out, and makes a beeline for the counter.

Will takes this as a tentative indicator that she’s willing to suffer her way through a work day now, and flips the sign on the door from *closed* to *open.* He barely waits for it to settle against the glass before he shuffles out back, closing himself into his small office.

Abigail and the rest of his bare-bones staff are more than used to his hermit-esque behavior by now, and Marissa doesn’t so much as flinch as Will slams the door.

Will spends the next few hours hunkered over his computer, tapping out expense reports and tabbing absently between other such distractions. Outside, the quiet sound of conversation leaks through the door, a good sign for business, he supposes.

Truthfully, there's even less for Will to do in his office than there probably would be out in the store, but Will needs a certain measure of quiet to start his day. He requires a … warm-up period before he can stand to stomach the intricate socializing of being a business owner.

It's enough to almost make him miss the days when his job used to allow him to stay shut-up in his house for weeks to months on end, barely rising from the keyboard but to eat and - occasionally - bathe. Now, with the benefit of distance, he can appreciate the solitude for loneliness it actually had been.

The realization is not enough to iron the nostalgia out of it however, and Will sets his pen aside with an irritated sigh, scrubbing a hand across his face.

God, he misses who he'd been two years ago with a fierceness that borders on downright viciousness.

Will admits that he's not doing anything hiding back here other than stirring up unwanted memories and reluctantly pries himself out of his weathered desk chair, tucking his hands in his pockets and slouching out.

Abigail is sitting at the mismatched break table doing school work and she looks up with an amused quirk of her brow. "Getting too stuffy in there?"

"Be quiet," he grumbles, briefly setting a hand atop her head as he passes by on his way to the sink. He plucks a glass from the draining board, fills it, and gulps it down greedily. It tastes more like rust than it does like water, but Will lives in the middle of nowhere with seven dogs; he's certainly tasted worse. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"I'm on my break," she says blithely, tucking her pen behind her ear. "Unless you're planning on breaking government mandated workers laws."

"Maybe don't say that so loudly," Will says, craning his neck to peer out into the cafe. "I think I see that reporter out there."

"The one you told to 'get the fuck off my property before I give you something to really write about'?"

"Yeah," Will says wistfully, setting his glass back atop the bench. "Wasn't one of my brighter moments."

"Free press is always good press."

"Not the kind Freddie Lounds engages in." Will frowns, leaning further forward. "Who's the man in the suit?"

"You're going to need to be more specific, Will; we're based near the business district, a lot of people wear suits."

"Not like this guy," Will says, which is as succinct explanation as any. "He's wearing pinstripe."

Will doesn't think he's ever seen somebody wear pinstripe before, not in the real world anyway. It should look ridiculous, or at the very least incredibly dated. It does not. It looks… precise. Elegant. Regal, even. Or perhaps that's just the aura of the man wearing it.

Will absorbs information on auto-pilot; takes in the ash-blonde of his neat hair, the measured gentleness with which he plucks a reluctant book from the shelf. He can't see his face from this angle, but Will doesn't need to. When Will really looks he *sees*, every time without fail.

There's a measurement about him, a stillness that is more perfected than is natural. His suit is fitted, and the shine of his shoes is probably worth more than the whole damn building. A man who demands attention even as he allows it to slip past him; confidence disguised as grace.

Will stares. For the first time in years, his fingers ache for his pen.

"Will?"

He starts, turning around to see Abigail gazing up at him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Will says, a bit dazed. "I was just… thinking."

Abigail's expression softens, and she sets aside her pen, getting to her feet so she can come close enough to brush a hand over his arm. Will realizes he has goosebumps and he hadn't even noticed.

"Deep thoughts or surface thoughts?"

He offers her a tired grin. "You know I can't control how deep my thoughts go."

Her gaze flickers behind him out to the shop and her mouth tightens. "That reporter is buying something," she says. "I'll take over for Marissa before she starts something."

Will pushes her gently back to the table. "You do your… whatever it is you're doing. I'm paying good money for your college, don't waste it. I'll go."

"I know you don't like to serve," Abigail argues. "Really, I can do it."

Sometimes, Abigail tries to baby him almost as much as Alana had. It's endearing up to a point, but Will is old enough to be Abigail's father - *is* her father, for all legal intents and purposes - and he'd survived all of his life before her without being handled with kid-gloves.

"It's fine," he says instead, and smoothes his shirt fruitlessly before stepping out.

" - not welcome here," Marrisa is just finishing saying as Will approaches, and he winces, even though he doesn't strictly disagree.

"It's fine," Will murmurers, gently guiding Marissa away from the counter. "I'll deal with it."

Marissa shoots Freddie one more acid look and then turns, vanishing into the back, assumedly to go hover protectively over Abigail.

He turns back to the counter. “Good afternoon, Ms. Lounds.”

Freddie’s smile is sugar sweet as she lays a battered book atop the counter, the red of her designer leather gloves against the cover almost bloody. “I would think we were past surnames by now, Will.”

Will doesn’t take the bait, merely plucking Freddie’s purchase from the counter and flipping back the cover to check the price scribbled on the front page. “That’ll be two dollars.”

“Your true crime section is getting rather thin.”

“That might be because a certain somebody has been coming in every other week for months and buying every book we have to prove some kind of point,” Will snaps.

“Shouldn’t you take this as an opportunity to restock?” Freddie asks blithely, sending two crumpled notes across the counter. Will is incredibly careful that their fingertips do not brush. “From one writer to another, I have to say, your selection is rather… lacking.”

Don’t take the bait, Will reminds himself, but he can’t help the way his back curves, shoulders settling up below his ears. Freddie Lounds has always rubbed him the wrong way, even when they ran in similar circles.

He tucks the receipt in between the cover and the front page and slides it back to Freddie. “I think calling either of us writers is a gross over exaggeration at best, Ms. Lounds,” he says, and is impressed with how steady he manages to keep his voice. “Thanks for your patronage. Get the fuck out of my store.”

Freddie picks the book up and tucks it in her bag, completely unfazed. “It was good seeing you again, Will,” she says brightly, like Will has ever invited her to the liberty of his given name. “I’ll see you next time.”

“Please don’t.”

She flutters her fingertips cheerfully and heads for the door. The tinkle of the bell as it closes behind her is music to Will’s ears. Slowly, he lets out breath that has been building in his lungs, and rubs at his temple with the firm press of his knuckles.

“Well,” says a deep, unfamiliar voice. “That was terribly rude.”

Will’s eyes snap open, hands fumbling down to grasp the edge of the counter. “I’m sorry, I didn’t -”

“Oh, you misunderstand me.” The man waiting in line sets a book down. “I was talking about the customer before me. A very particular lack of manners in that one.”

It’s the man in the suit; hair perfectly combed, and the lapels of his jacket razor straight. Up close, Will notices that his eyes are a truly spectacular shade of brown that borders on maroon. He’s handsome, too. Will is more surprised that he noticed than anything else.

“I’m still sorry you had to see that,” Will says. “It was…” he pauses for a moment, fishing for right word, and eventually settles on, “unprofessional.”

The man smiles thinly. “I think it would take a blind man to ever accuse our dear Ms. Lounds of professionalism,” he says.

“You know her?”

“Of her. I’ve read her journalism.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to accuse her of journalism either, honestly.”

That gets him a broader smile, more amused than before. “Nor would I,” he says. He extends a hand. “Hannibal Lecter.”

It takes Will a moment to realize that he’s been given a name and a hand to shake. Hastily, he wipes his sweaty palm off on his jeans to take it. “Will Graham.”

If he recognizes Will’s name, he does a good job not showing it. “You own this store?”

Will shrugs modestly, chancing another look past the rims of his glasses. Hannibal has his hands neatly folded atop the counter, apparently in no particular hurry. There’s a certain weight to his gaze that is more than Will can handle on any given day, let alone one as shaky as this, and he looks away quickly. “Pays the bills.”

“Well, then I most offer my compliments. This is a nice store you run, Mr. Graham. A good collection and an admirable atmosphere.”

“Will’s fine,” Will says, a little awkwardly. “Is this your first time here?”

“It is. I was recommended it by a colleague. She promised me you had quite the eclectic collection of out of print books, and I’m pleased to see she was correct.”

“Colleague?”

“Doctor Du Maurier,” Hannibal says, perfectly pleasant.

The wheels of Will’s memory spin for a moment, before they finally catch and spit up an image of a beautiful, poised blonde with a smile like an iceberg and melodic but quiet voice. She’d ordered more than a few expensive books, and even without Will’s formidable memory he suspects he’d remember her clearly.

“She’s a good client,” Will says. “Good for business.”

“Good for both of us,” Hannibal says, delicately sliding his purchase towards Will. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t have found you otherwise. You’re a bit out of the way.”

Will plucks the book from the counter. It’s not English. He flips back the cover and finds his scrawled writing on the front page. Not a collector’s edition then. Even Will wasn’t dumb enough to scribble on something like that. “Yeah, keeps our clientele honest. Ten dollars.”

“Do you often worry about dishonest clientele?” Hannibal says curiously as he pulls an actual goddamn money clip from his pocket and peels a crisp twenty from it. When he passes it over, their fingertips brush, and Will tries not to be obvious about the way he pulls back.

“Well, you know,” he says vaguely. “It is what it is. Here’s your change.”

Hannibal accepts the proffered ten and then immediately slips it into the largely barren tip jar beside the register that Will has (mostly) jokingly labeled “Abigail’s College Fund”.

“Do you get many new visitors?”

“We have enough regulars that I don’t feel hard up for customers,” Will says. “Besides, I’d rather familiar faces I trust not to misorder the books to the alternative.”

“You respect the integrity of your shop more than the weight of your ledger?” Hannibal asks. “That’s an appreciative thought.”

“It’s not like that,” Will says, feeling once again lost for words. Hannibal talks in a strangely circular way, deeply thick with metaphors and a gentle jump from one topic to the next. Will would hate to see how the average person keeps up with him in conversation. “Besides, I’m not usually out here like this.”

Hannibal mouth quirks. “I’ll take that as an honour, then, although I assume your goal was more in line with preventing Ms. Lounds from harassing your unsuspecting staff.”

“Marissa likes to pick fights,” Will sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Normally, I’m fine to let her, but…”

“It’s different when whatever she says will wind up tomorrow’s headline.”

“Exactly.”

Hannibal picks his book up, tucking it under his arm. “Well, I should perhaps stop monopolizing your time when you have a store to run.”

Will glances at the largely empty store. There’s exactly two other customers in the building, and one of them appears to have fallen asleep in an armchair with a book on his lap. “Yeah, we’re real busy.”

“Is that an invitation to continue our conversation?”

Will balks. He hadn’t intended for it to be, but nor had he intended for it to be a dismissal. He hadn’t even intended for the conversation to wander as far as it had, which had seemed fine in the moment when he’d been unaware of it, but now feels like an incredible misstep.

Will does not do small talk.

This does not feel like small talk though. This feels like… genuine conversation, perhaps.

Will doesn't think he's really had enough 'genuine conversation' to confidently define it, but if he were to go out on a limb, he'd say he probably doesn't do that either.

The sheer weight of his tangible awkwardness must show on his face because Hannibal smiles again, straightening up and offering his hand once more. Bemused, Will shakes it again. Somehow, the careful, steady press of his fingers is just as surprising the second time around.

"I hope you'll allow me the honour of your company again next time I'm in," Hannibal says.

Will does not know what to say to that. "Yeah, I'll, uh. I'll be here."

Hannibal releases his hand. Will does not think he imagines the brush of his fingertips lingering on the back of his palm. He doesn't know what to say about that either. Will's whole life has revolved around the careful construction of words, but right now he feels unfairly robbed of them.

"Until next time, Will."

Hannibal goes, and Will watches him, confused and curious. He has broad shoulders, he notices. It's a stupid thing to notice, really, but Will's only human.

The door swings shut and Will stares blankly after it. The man in the armchair snores.

Abigail's head pops out from around the corner, hair swinging with the momentum. The look she gives Will is unreadable. "I've never seen you actually *talk* to a customer before."

"Of course I talk to customers," Will says, indignant. "I run a bookstore, Abigail. You don't get sales by acting mute."

Her expression says she's not buying into a single word he says. She flicks her eyes to the door, lingering, and then back at him. "He seemed nice."

Will's stomach turns. "Leave it alone."

Her brow tightens. "I'm just -"

" *Don't*."

She sighs, eyes rolling in a gesture that is so incredibly teenage that it makes Will ache. "I'm finished with my homework. We can trade, if you want. I'll chat up the customers and you can hide in the back."

Will beats his retreat with as much dignity as he can manage. Abigail gives him an amused look as she passes by him on the way to the counter, but quickly pastes on a smile as a customer shuffles over.

In the back, he finds Marissa at the table, staring absently at Abigail's homework. "You won't get anything out of your education if you just copy it," he warns.

He expects a sharp reply, but she doesn't so much as look up. Will frowns, shuffling closer. "Marissa?" He sets a hand on her shoulder.

She jerks, sudden and vicious, and then continues to jerk. There's a sound stuttering from her mouth, but Will can't tell if it's meant to be words, or just the instinctual reaction of a body going into a fit. She falls from the chair before Will can catch her and hits her head on the way down.

Will's basic first aid skills are long since rusty with disuse, and even if they weren't, he suspects they'd be largely useless in the face of this. He feels a familiar kernel of panic trying to unfold in his stomach, but it blows away almost instantly, lost in muscle memory.

"Abigail, I need you in here."

"Will? What - *Marissa!* "

Will strips out of his jacket and presses it into Abigail's hands as she rushes over. "If you can, get that underneath her head," he instructs. "Call an ambulance, and try to keep her from biting her tongue, but otherwise don't touch her."

"Where are you -"

Will does not pause, trusts Abigail with this. A childhood of trauma and the deposition of a survivor have long since burnt any uncertainty from her, and he can already see her steady hands gently brushing Marissa's hair out of the way, slipping his jacket beneath the tremors of her skull.

Will tears from the back and through the empty store. The bell clatters loudly as he throws the door open, and he hopes that Hannibal isn't one of those madmen who like to power walk everywhere.

He is not. He's waiting at the pedestrian crossing just down the road, and the relief Will feels is crushing.

"Doctor Lecter!"

Hannibal turns sharply, responding on instinct. If he's surprised to see Will hanging out his shop, he does not show it. Will feels like he doesn't even see him move, but in the space of all of a few seconds, Hannibal is by his side, ushering him back into the store with a hand to his back.

"Show me what happened," he commands, taking everything in stride, and there's an indescribable sense of reassurance in passing the reins of the situation over to somebody far more equipped to deal with it.

He leads him into the back where Marissa is on the floor. She's stopped seizing, but the limpness in her is even more terrifying than the fit had been. Abigail's on the phone, presumably with 911, and Hannibal guides her out of the way easily.

“Her name is Marissa?” Hannibal clarifies as he bends to check her breathing, and then her pulse.

“Yeah. She just started seizing all of a sudden. I don’t know what set her off.”

“It mightn’t have been anything,” Hannibal reassures him as his hands frame Marissa's skinny face. “She fell?”

“From the chair. Hit her head on the way down.”

Hannibal frowns, and Will watches as he pries Marissa's jaw out of its stubborn lock. Instantly, dark red oozes out, painting her lips and dribbling down her chin.

“Is she -?”

“She just bit her tongue,” Hannibal says, and Will watches as he efficiently moves her into a recovery position. “She’s still in a daze. I can’t say anything about her head in this condition, but so far I don’t see anything that alarms me.”

Will lets out a breath. At some point Abigail had vanished from the room. “She’ll be okay?”

Hannibal gets to his feet, gently brushing off his trousers. “Very likely.”

Before Will can reply, Abigail comes bursting back into the room, this time trailed by two paramedics. Will has had enough experience with emergency situations during his time as a cop to know the best thing he can do right now is give them space to work.

He backs out of the staff area, nodding at Abigail as she catches his eyes. She smiles shakily but turns around as Marissa starts to stir.

Abigail had already had the forethought to flip their *closed* sign, and it’s with some relief that Will allows himself to slump into the overstuffed armchair in the corner of the floor. Hannibal trails after him, hands folded behind his back and giving Will a respectful distance.

Will clears his throat. “Thanks,” he says. “I don’t - it’s been a while. I didn’t trust myself to know how to handle the situation.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “I’m glad I was of help.” The silence between them is heavy and meaningful. “Although, I must say, I don’t remember telling you I was a doctor.”

Will winces, leaning forward to rest his elbows atop his knees, scrubbing his hands over his face as he buys time. Hannibal watches him keenly, and Will can’t help but be overly aware of the heaviness of his gaze. “Yeah,” Will says. “You didn’t.”

A pause. Will can hear Marissa in the back now, voice thick and slurred, but coherent.

“Have we met before?”

They haven’t. Will knows that Hannibal knows that. It’s such a polite prompt though that Will can’t help but be impressed. What he’d give to have at least a fraction of Hannibal’s

social graces.

“No,” he says. “It’s just. Um. Obvious. To me.”

“In what way, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Shit,” Will laughs, rubbing his sweaty palms over his knees of his jeans. “It’s just all the little things, you know? You called Doctor Du Maurier a colleague.”

“That could mean any number of things,” Hannibal points out, as Will knew he would. “It’s quite a leap to assume that means I, too, am one.”

“I didn’t assume. I knew.”

Hannibal eyes flicker over him, from the scruff of his hair to the scuffs on his shoes. Will can’t imagine he cuts a very impressive picture, but Hannibal tilts his head and makes a thoughtful noise. “Yes, you certainly seem sure.”

“Look,” Will says gruffly, “I can’t… it’s hard to explain. It’s like - you know profiling, right?”

“Criminal profiling?” Hannibal sounds amused.

Will winces. “Essentially,” he says. “Doesn’t have to be a criminal though, it’s just the most common application, right? You’re just… taking the available evidence and extrapolating the truth of a situation.”

“And what is the truth of my situation?”

“You have steady hands,” Will says, because it’s the first thing that comes to his head. “A musician’s hands, a surgeon’s hands. You’re confident. Calm. The card Doctor Du Maurier left me is for a private psychiatry practice in the city, so she’s very accomplished, which gives you a very well connected ‘colleague’. Your suit is expensive, you have an awareness of the room.” Will shrugs helplessly. “I could have been wrong, of course. There are other professions those parameters could fit.”

“You weren’t wrong though.”

“No,” Will agrees. “I rarely am.”

“Rarely?”

Will licks his lips and looks an inch above the flawless shoulder of Hannibal’s coat. “Never,” he admits. “I never am.”

Hannibal doesn’t say anything else. Will feels strangely overcome, very near to a palpable anxiety attack. He doesn’t do so well with confrontation, and he does even worse with curiosity.

His people skills have always been weak, his public persona liable to collapse at very careful prodding, but his recent stint of isolation has seen those foundations turn from weak to almost nonexistent.

He braces himself for Hannibal's next question, shoulders tight enough to ache, but Hannibal doesn't say anything. Will waits. And waits. Then, frowning, he makes himself look up and meet Hannibal's eye.

There's a mask even more carefully constructed than Will's own pasted on his fine, aristocratic features. A blankness too precise to be anything but incredibly intentional. It does not, WIll finds, extend to the dark void of his eyes. Not when the one looking into them is Will Graham.

There's curiosity, of course. Will had been prepared for that. But there's also … what's the word for it? He's drawing a desperate blank, heart thudding loudly in his chest. Every phrase he hits on feels too hollow, too *light*, to capture the weight of that look.

Hungry, he thinks. No. Not right.

Coveting.

Will can't breathe. He has to be wrong, just this once. People do not 'covet' Will Graham. They're curious, and they're distrustful. Sometimes, they're amused, like he's nothing more than a fun party game to wheel out for entertainment. A lot of the time they're… *fearful.*

Will's not wrong though. He never is.

He's too shocked to do anything but stare helplessly back, mouth faintly agape and fingernails digging into the arms of the chair either side of him.

They must look so incredibly stupid, he thinks, but he can't think of a single thing to say that doesn't sound awkward and cheap.

Thankfully, before the silences stretches from awkward into suffocating, he hears the clatter of movement in the backroom, and he looks up to see the paramedics carefully helping Marissa through the doorway. She looks confused and tired, but comparatively well.

Will takes the chance to leap from his seat, putting distance between himself and Hannibal. When he chances a glance back, that curious fire in his eyes is gone, extinguished in the presence of an audience.

"How are you?" he asks Marissa, and then, to the paramedics, "How is she?"

"Fine," Marissa says groggily, with a spark of her trademark irritation.

"We'll take her into the hospital," the nearest paramedics says. "Make sure she didn't do any damage when she fell, and keep an eye on her in case of a repeat performance. See if we can figure out what caused it. Do you want to come with her?"

Will hesitates, struck by such a sudden bout of crippling awkwardness that he doesn't know how to begin responding to what had been, honestly, a fairly innocuous question.

"I'll go," Abigail says, appearing at Will's elbow. "If that's alright."

The paramedic shrugs. "Whoever is fine, but we need to get going."

Abigail lays a hand on Will's wrist, dragging his attention back to her. She offers him a thin smile. "I'll call you with news later," she says.

"Her mother -"

"I'll call."

It's pathetic how relieved that makes him.

Marissa looks more than a little shaky on her feet, but she walks out the front door more or less under her own power, and the tight tension Will hadn't even noticed knotting his guts like a rope slowly unspools.

He wants to call it genuine worry for one of his employees and his surrogate daughter's best friend, but it feels a lot more like reluctance to find somebody to fill her shifts, let alone the bad press of a part-timer dying in his store. The last thing Freddie Lounds needs is more ammunition to assassinate his character.

The door swings shut as the girls and the paramedics leave, the bell jingles cheerfully behind them. Will is giving serious thought to having it removed.

"You will not go with her?"

Will gives a shallow laugh, running a hand through his hair. He turns to give Hannibal a wry smile. "Me? No, not a good idea. Her parents would be… disapproving if they discovered me keeping vigil beside her at the hospital."

It's the perfect opening for another line of questioning, and Hannibal seems like the kind of man who has a wealth of them for even the most benign of situations. Will is not a benign situation. He's aware of the kind of interest his mind garners, the debates the psychiatric community have over it.

As far as Will is concerned, it's an elegantly baited steel trap, just as likely to spring on him as it is on anybody else.

Will clears his throat and glances up, although he can't quite manage to make himself look at Hannibal's face. He picks a safe spot just to the right of his ear, and prepares to weather the next round of interrogation, experience preparing him for anything Hannibal throws at him.

Instead, Hannibal asks, "Would you like to have dinner?"

Not so prepared after all, maybe. "I - what?"

“Not tonight, of course,” Hannibal says, sounding more like he’s musing to himself than conversing with Will. “I’d like time to plan a menu and organize ingredients.”

“Wait, you don’t just mean going out to Olive Garden, do you?”

“Surely not,” Hannibal says, like the very idea hadn’t even occurred to him. “I promise you will find a better meal at my table than you will anywhere else in this city.”

“Not to be arrogant or anything,” Will replies dryly, to cover how wrong footed he feels.

“Ah, but is it not only arrogance if one does not have the means to back up their claim? Otherwise it is merely a statement of fact.”

“You seem very confident in your facts, Doctor Lecter.”

“Please, if I had wanted you to call me by my title instead of my name, that’s what I would have introduced myself as, Will. And if you come to dinner, you can judge for yourself whether it’s merely arrogance or confidence.”

Will feels as if he left his mind in the backroom, caught several paces behind the conversation and struggling to keep up. “I’m not a good dinner guest,” Will warns. “I’m ... bad company, I believe was the phrase.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Hannibal says. “So far I have enjoyed your company enormously.”

Will laughs, mouth twisting. *You won’t for long,* he thinks, but cannot find the strength to say. Perhaps Abigail had been onto something after all.

Will does not consider himself lonesome, thought he must admit that his life, by definition, is lonely. It’d been a long time since anybody had invited Will Graham to dinner - longer still, since he’d wanted to say yes.

He looks Hannibal up and down, assessing, and Hannibal bears the weight of his gaze patiently and calmly, looking like he has all the time in the world for Will and his issues.

Why the hell not? Will thinks, a little bitterly. *A nice dinner with an attractive man, what have I got to lose here?*

The answer is as pathetic as it is sad; nothing. Nothing at all. As a general rule, Will does not let himself have nice things, because it’s never worth the pain of losing them in the end. And he always loses them.

This isn’t a nice thing though. This is just… dinner. Conversation. If Will does not let himself think about the possibility of a second dinner, of a third, then he has nothing to lose, and even Will’s defensive walls can only be raised so high.

“Alright,” he says, the words falling out of his mouth. “Yeah, we can… we can do dinner.”

The smile Hannibal gives him does something truly spectacular to his stomach. “Will tomorrow night work for you?”

“Yes,” Will says, and then, cursing, “no. Fuck. Sorry, Marissa was meant to close up tomorrow, but I’ll probably -”

“Wednesday, then?” Hannibal says smoothly.

“Wednesday works for me if it works for you.”

“Excellent.”

Will watches as Hannibal steps to the counter and plucks one of Will’s business cards from their holder by the register. Will had never bothered getting a landline for the store, so his personal number is typed neatly at the bottom. “I assume I can reach you through this number?”

“Yeah.”

Hannibal’s long fingers tuck it in his breast pocket quickly and with the ease of somebody long used to collecting business cards whenever he goes. Will wonders whether he has a wallet for them, or possibly a rolodex. Hannibal strikes him as the kind of old school guy who’d like a rolodex.

“I’ll see you Wednesday,” Will says, lacking anything else.

Hannibal looks up and gives him another smile that shows the sharp edges of his teeth, eyes crinkling at the corner. “Wednesday,” he agrees, and then, with a look in his eyes that Will can't quite decipher, “I look forward to having you for dinner.”

Chapter End Notes

i was unsure about starting a multichapter for a fandom that's got one foot in the grave, but in the end i really just love this idea a whole lot, and really want to share it with whoever is still kicking about out there.

tumblr: glenflower
twitter: @doingwritebyme

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will sleeps poorly, as he had known he would.

The day had been too long, too *full*, and his overworked brain liked to twist and tear at anything that entered it. Freddie, Marissa, Hannibal - any one of those things on their own, Will probably could have coped with. Together, they were too much.

He dreams of the stag, leading him through the woods just outside the house. He dreams of a yawning chasm opening up beneath him, the blackness of it slithering over his feet and up his ankles, crawling, crawling, crawling until it hits his chin - and then his mouth.

He wakes up gagging, hands scrabbling at his throat and his dogs barking at the foot of his bed.

Needless to say, it's not a good night.

He stops by the hospital before he goes to work, and Marissa looks about as excited to see him as Will had anticipated she would be.

"I thought visiting hours didn't start until nine."

"I told them I was your boss, and I needed to check in with you about your health. It's amazing what the truth can get you."

Marissa snorts. Will looks her over, and is relieved to see that she looks well. "Do they have a verdict?"

She shrugs, glancing out the window and tugging idly at her hair. "Probably just a once off," she says. "They'll do some tests to be sure, but there's no reason to think it'll happen again." She glances up sharply. "I'm still not coming into work today."

"I know," Will says dryly. "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"You could have asked Abigail."

Will sighs. "Get well soon, Marissa. Let me know when you're ready to come back to work."

She doesn't even say goodbye, but Will hadn't expected her to.

His phone rings just as he's leaving the hospital, and Will frowns, unable to place the number. "Hello?"

"*Will*," Hannibal greets. "*I hope this isn't too early*."

Will tosses his coat carelessly in the back of the car and climbs into the front seat. “No, it’s fine. I’m just about to head to the store.”

“*It’s quite early. Your hours say you don’t open for two hours yet*.”

Will scrubs a hand through his hair and tries not to feel like a child caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to. “Yeah, well, I was awake anyway. Isn’t it early for you?”

“*I’m an early riser. I was just calling to check if you had given any more thought to dinner tomorrow?*”

Will has thought of a little else since. “Yeah, I’m still in.”

“*Do you have any allergies I should be aware of?*”

“I’ll eat whatever’s put in front of me,” Will says honestly. “There’s no worry on that front.”

“*Excellent. Is eight o’clock too late for you?*”

“That’s fine.”

Will starts the car, and Hannibal must catch it through the phone because he says, “*I’ll leave you be, then. You can reach me on this number if you need to. Would you like my address now?* Do you have a pen?”

“I have a good memory, it’s fine. Tell me.”

Hannibal does, and Will is unsurprised to note it’s in one of the nicer areas of uptown Baltimore. He wouldn’t expect anything less.

“All good,” Will says, stuffing the phone between his shoulder and his cheek as he fumbles with his seatbelt. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Do you need me to bring anything?”

“*Just yourself,*” Hannibal says warmly. “*Enjoy your day, Will.*”

“Yeah. You too.” Will hangs up before he says something stupid. Phone calls make him overwhelmingly anxious. Too little sensory information to work with.

He’s only barely caught his breath when his phone vibrates and he looks down to see an incoming text.

Unknown number
I look forward to having you tomorrow night

Will reads the message uncertainty, thumb smoothing over the screen as he thinks. He doesn’t have the energy to reply, but after a moment of hesitation he saves the number and tosses his phone to the passenger seat before he can overthink it.

--

Tuesday goes quickly. Without Marissa, Will is forced out of his office and into the store proper. By the time he crawls into bed that night, he's a tight ball of tension and anxiety.

He sleeps poorly again. He dreams of the stag, and this time the darkness drags him into the ground, burying him mercilessly in the freezing soil. His alarm jerks him awake at just past seven, and he crawls out of bed feeling like death.

Will spends most of the day distracted. Thankfully, his customers have never expected conversation from him, and Abigail is too caught up in worrying about Marissa to press him for details.

At six o'clock, he closes the store with no shortage of relief. He'd thought about heading back to Wolf Trap before dinner to change and freshen up, but Will didn't think he could stomach that much back and forth in a single day.

The downside is that Will spends a good hour and a half puttering uselessly about the store, drowning in his own anxiety, straightening shelves and adjusting books. Eventually, he decides that so long as he's stuck here he might as well make himself useful, and disappears into the back for some long overdue accounting.

At just shy of seven-thirty, Will shuts down his computer, locks the store, and gets in his car to drive to Hannibal's.

The drive is shorter than he'd prefer, and as Will pulls into the street on which Hannibal lives and looks over at his house, he wonders if he ought not have canceled after all, just out of sheer discomfort.

To say that Hannibal's house is a *little* intimidating would be a lot like saying Will *sometimes* sleeps poorly, or that he's *occasionally* a nervous wreck. It's the kind of house that you walk by and think wistfully '*man, if only*', all the while knowing you would never would.

Will doesn't know why he's so taken aback. He'd seen Hannibal's suit, his general demeanor. Will would not be surprised, he thinks, if Hannibal hasn't bought a suit off a rack in all of his life.

He can see Hannibal's Bentley parked neatly in the drive, and he feels incredibly self-conscious as he pulls his beaten old sedan up beside it. He takes a moment to just sit in the car gathering his wits before he climbs out, slams the door, and marches empty-handed up Hannibal's front steps.

Will wonders if he should have brought something with him after all. He'd considered wine, but he didn't need his empathy to tell him that whatever he could have supplied would have been subpar when compared to what Hannibal would probably provide. There was no point forcing them both to suffer through Will's mediocre wine selection when Hannibal seems the type to have a goddamn wine cellar.

Will lets out a tight breath, rubs his sweaty palms against his thighs, and rings the doorbell.

In the minute before the door opens, Will manages to second guess himself at least a dozen times.

This had been a mistake. Will isn't the kind of person who does sit-down dinners. He's not the kind of person who does *friends,* either. This evening is going to be a disaster. He's going to say too much, too little, he's going to talk about all the wrong things or he's going to freeze up and not talk at all.

Does Hannibal know who he is? He'd said he read TattleCrime, so he *must*.

What if Hannibal wants to talk about it? Or, worse yet, what if he doesn't, and they spend the whole night awkwardly talking around the elephant in the room?

What if -

The door opens. Hannibal is standing at the threshold wearing a half-apron and looking extraordinary pleased to see him.

"Will," he says. "You're right on time. Please come in."

Will follows Hannibal inside, feeling his last chance to make a hasty retreat slip from his fingers. He wouldn't have taken it anyway, he knows.

He hates the unknown – but he hates the furious burn of curiosity more. No matter how terrible tonight winds up being, Will knows he's going to see it through. The same shiver in his gut that once drew him to blood and murder would never let a possibility like this pass him by.

"May I take your coat?" Hannibal asks politely, but before Will can even answer he's already turning him around, gently slipping it from Will's shoulders with the ease of much practice. He hangs it by the door and even takes a moment to smooth out the creases. Will doesn't have the heart to tell him that he'd unearthed it from a box at the bottom of his closet.

"So I guess you were serious about cooking?"

Hannibal smiles at him. Wiping his hands off on his apron, he beckons Will to the kitchen. The closer they get, the more he can smell something warm and vaguely spicy. He hadn't been all that hungry on the drive, nerves blunting his appetite better than any meal could, but now his stomach actually *growls*.

"I'm nearly finished preparing dinner," Hannibal says as they step into the kitchen. "You're welcome to stay, or wait in the dining room. Whatever you prefer."

Will looks around curiously. With all of Hannibal's talk, he'd anticipated his kitchen to look like it'd been lifted straight from a restaurant; shiny steel and silver everywhere he looked.

It does not. There is steel and silver in the impressive kitchen island, and the adjacent table beside it, and in the intimidatingly large inbuilt refrigerator, but the overall atmosphere of the kitchen is *warm*. The tiles beneath his feet are earthy-coloured, and there's a charmingly rustic window in the wall that has long since been bricked up into a shelf. There's an

armchair in the corner, and a shelf of books beside it, and despite himself Will can't help but feel the tension bleed out.

This is a precious space, he realizes. This is the heart of Hannibal's house, his comfort, his true domain. It's a privilege to be allowed into it, and Will can only hope he doesn't track mud inside.

"I'll stay here, if you don't mind," he says, and Hannibal graces him with another small smile before the food steals his attention away.

"I would not have offered if I minded. Your company is delightful and appreciated."

Will doesn't know what to say to that. He hasn't been called 'delightful' a day in his life, but he thinks pointing that out to Hannibal would probably be rude.

He leans against the bench that runs the wall, far enough out of the way so as not to be disruptive, but near enough to crane his head and watch. "What are we eating?"

"Kudal," Hannibal says, not looking up from where he's ladling something that smells fantastic into what - when Will takes a second look - appears to be bowls made of *leaves*. "It's a South Indian curry. Given the weather, I thought something spicy and warm would be appreciated."

Will's mouth twitches at the corner. "Is the foliage a necessity?"

Hannibal gives a quiet laugh. He's now adjusting the accompanying rice, as if Will cares if the mounds are less than slightly perfect. "It adds a certain flavour, and, I will admit, presents a pleasing aesthetic."

"Well, I can't argue with the results. It smells amazing."

Hannibal looks up, and his eyes catch the dim kitchen lighting. "You can choose whether to argue with the results once you've tasted it."

"I'm not exactly known to be a picky eater," Will says. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

Hannibal finishes serving and deftly picks up the plates, one sitting along his forearm like a professional in an expensive restaurant. If the idea of Hannibal waiting on anybody wasn't so ridiculous, Will would almost think he'd been trained.

"I await your judgement," he says, and leads the way out of the room.

The dining room is just as surprising as the kitchen had been. There's a crackling fireplace and a chandelier that add a certain theatricality to the space, but the kitchen-side wall has been turned into an indoor herb garden. Will can smell parsley and basil, the faintest hint of rosemary, as he passes it by. It softens the room, eases the intimidating loom of Hannibal's decor - turns it from a performance into a welcoming.

Hannibal gently sets Will's plate down first, and then his own. "Take a seat. I'll be right back."

Hannibal vanishes back into the kitchen and Will awkwardly sits. To his relief, Hannibal is back before Will has the chance to do anything more than fiddle with the expertly folded napkin beside him. He's holding a wine bottle, and Will's French is far too rusty to decipher the label wrapped around it. He doesn't need to in order to know that he made the right call not to bring his own.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Please."

Hannibal leans over Will's shoulder to pour. They don't touch, but he's incredibly aware of their proximity. He can smell Hannibal's aftershave; something rich and dark but very subtle.

Hannibal fills the glass half full and pulls away, serves himself, and then sets the bottle in the centre of the table as he takes his seat, unbuttoning the front of his waistcoat. Too late, Will realizes that Hannibal hadn't been wearing it when he'd answered the door, had clearly taken it off while he was cooking.

The memory of him in the simple burgundy shirt with the sleeves rolled up his strong forearms hits him suddenly, and Will regrets that he hadn't paid more attention at the time.

"I thought a dry wine might accompany the dish best," Hannibal says, plucking his glass from the tabletop and swirling it expertly. He breathes it in with the ease of long practice. "Of course, let me know if you have any preferences for next time, and I will try my best to accommodate you."

Assuming there's a next time, Will thinks, but decides not to say. He reaches for his own glass. "I'm not usually a wine guy," Will says. "I think I'll have to defer to you on this one."

"What is your usual preference?"

Will smiles. "Whisky," he admits. "Scotch." Tentatively, he sips and is relieved when it's not entirely awful. "This is good."

"I'm glad you like it. Shall we eat?"

The food tastes even better than it looks. Will has to make a conscious effort to stop himself from just shoveling it down like he might if he were on his own. His effort are rewarded when Hannibal gives him a pleased smile in between bites.

Will clears his throat and takes another mouthful of his wine. "Sorry."

"For what? It's an honour to see you clearly enjoying the meal."

Will chances a look up from his plate to see Hannibal staring at him with something that can only be described as rapt fascination, watching Will's fork pass chicken between his lips. He glances back down quickly and feels a faint burn climbing the back of his neck.

Hannibal's casual intensity in everything is deeply unsettling and Will doesn't know how to politely work around it. "You're staring."

"Am I?" Hannibal sounds more amused than sorry. "My apologies. As a chef, the joy of seeing a meal consumed is often greater than the joy of creating it."

"Where did you learn to cook?"

"I didn't. I'm self-taught, I believe is the phrase. I began to teach myself during my time in Paris, and by the time I came to America I had developed my skills sufficiently that I felt like I could share it with others."

Will glances up, interest piqued. "You're not from Paris though."

Hannibal gives him an indulgent smile. "I am not, no. I was born in Lithuania, but I left it when I was still very much a boy."

"Why?"

"I went to live with my uncle and his wife. After that, I spent some time in Italy before I made the choice to come to America and further expand my career."

Will studies him for a second, but if the subject of his youth is a sore one, Hannibal shows no sign of it. Still, there's a certain dismissiveness with which he speaks of his past that adds a distance greater than the years can bridge. Will wants to press, but instead he says, "How long have you been in America?"

Hannibal gives no indication that he knows Will has changed the topic, but Will knows he's aware of it. "Nearly twenty years now. It's more home than any of the countries I have lived in so far. What of yourself, Will? You're not from Baltimore."

Will laughs and looks down as he presses rice onto his fork. "That obvious, huh?"

"Only to somebody who has a very discerning ear for accents."

Will winces. "I grew up in the south," he admits. "Spent a few years in the New Orleans PD."

"You worked to rid yourself of your roots?"

It would be a casual question if not for the heavy and precise way it had been phrased. Hannibal may have a discerning ear for accents, but Will has a discerning ear for something else.

"Oh, god," Will blurts before he can stop himself, revulsion thick in his voice as the revelation hits. "You're not just a doctor, you're a *psychiatrist.*"

Hannibal pauses with one hand reaching towards his wine. It's the closest Will has come so far to catching him off guard, and despite himself he can't help but feel unaccountably proud.

"Going by your tone, I feel as if I should be apologizing for that."

Hannibal's voice is mostly amused - intrigued, even - but Will flushes deeply. "Sorry," he says, meaning it. "I didn't - I hadn't realized is all. You took me by surprise and I, uh, have been known to handle surprises poorly."

"If I'd known it'd have upset you so much, I would have divulged it earlier. I promise you I was not keeping secrets nefariously."

"No, no," Will says, running a jittery hand through his hair. "I'm not upset, sorry. I should have picked it up earlier, but you're so…" He waves a vague hand in Hannibal's general direction. "The way you naturally talk, it just kind of slipped by me."

"Shall I take it that your previous experiences with those in my profession have been subpar?"

Will thinks fleetingly of Alana; her gentle hands and the warmth of her smile. "There was one that wasn't so bad," he allows. "Mostly though, your lot just…" He has to pause to loosen his grip on the cutlery before it bends in his hands. He huffs out a strained laugh. "Let's just say, my particular brand of neurosis inspires a lot of *discussion*, and I'm not often invited to participate."

Hannibal studies him for a moment, and Will tries his hardest not to look as bitter as he feels. He expects Hannibal to press, to ask Will to elaborate on just what his 'neurosis' is, but instead he says, "Tell me about your store."

Will blinks, once again thrown. "What about it?"

"Did you inherit it? Purchase it?"

He snorts before he can stop himself. The only thing Will had ever inherited from his father had been a love for deep water and a developing drinking problem. "I bought it," he says. "I've had it, god… about a year and a half now, I think?"

"Not long," Hannibal observes.

"No, I suppose not. Feels longer than it is."

"For a place so new, you've done well to court as many devoted customers as you have."

Will smiles, just a little and sets his knife and fork down as neat as he can. "We do okay," he says, because it's in bad taste to admit aloud how proud he feels.

It seems Hannibal can tell anyway, because he offers Will a smile that feels gentler than everything else he has seen so far. "Are you up for desert?"

Will blinks and glances down at his plate. He'd picked it clean, but the serving had been smaller than he's used to. Will gets the impression that Hannibal is perhaps in the habit of cooking multiple courses, and had made the executive decision not to overwhelm Will. A good call, really. Exactly what he'd expect of a psychiatrist.

“Sure,” he says. “I haven’t eaten this good in…” He pauses to think and then realizes he has nothing to finish that sentence with and gives Hannibal an awkward smile.

Hannibal looks pleased and gets to his feet, sweeping away Will’s dish and pausing to pour him another glass of wine while he’s there.

“Do you need a hand bringing anything out?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal says, and his hand brushes briefly along the back of Will’s shoulders. “You are my guest.”

Will watches him flitter back to the kitchen. He takes longer this time, but Will feels strangely at peace. He’d expected to tense up as the evening chugged along, but somehow Hannibal had managed to unwind him instead. It’s nothing short of a miracle, honestly, and Will does not know how he feels about it.

He stands, circling the room to get a better look around without Hannibal’s eyes weighing heavily on his back.

The herb garden looks well maintained, and Will can see where plants have been plucked, the soil beneath soothed over to cover the wounds and not ruin the line of the aesthetic. Will trails closer to the fireplace to warm himself on the flames, and as he glances up he finally gets a good look at the rather *intimate* art Hannibal has displayed.

Will’s seen renditions of Leda and the Swan before, but never hung so casually where anybody and their mother would be forced to look at it.

“Do you like the art?”

Will turns to see Hannibal approaching, two glass dessert bowls artfully cradling what looks like tiramisu.

“A little ostentatious, don’t you think?” Will asks, accepting the bowl.

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth quirks. “I find much can be read in a viewer’s reaction.”

“I don’t know how it took me so long to realize you were a psychiatrist,” Will says.

“Why do you say that?”

Will spoons up a mouthful of the creamy tiramisu. It’s rich and decadent, and everything he hadn’t realized he’d wanted until this second. “It’s either that or a psychopath,” Will says. “Classic ‘take them apart and see how they tick’ mentality. You can’t help but prod just to see what will happen.”

The light of the fire darkens Hannibal’s already opaque eyes. There’s something in his expression, but it’s gone so quick that Will has a hard time reading it. Amusement, he thinks. Fascination.

Will shivers and turns away, focuses on the food. “This is good. Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome,” Hannibal says, and makes no suggestion for them to return to the table, even though Will thinks it’d probably be a safe bet that Hannibal hasn’t eaten a meal standing up in a very long time, if ever.

For a moment, they share a quiet, companionable silence bathed in the warmth of the fireplace. Will likes that Hannibal doesn’t expect him to fill every second with chatter, lets the conversation rise and fall in accordance with Will’s moods.

It’s not often, he finds, that people are content to just let him be himself. It’s nice.

Will clears his throat and fixes his eyes on the coals smoking merrily beneath the wood. “Why did you really invite me to dinner?”

He can see Hannibal tilt his head from the corner of his eye, studying Will. “Why do I need to have a reason?”

Will laughs. “Everybody has a reason for everything. You barely know me, and I can’t imagine I made a very good first impression.”

Hannibal eats his desert serenely. “On the contrary,” he says. “You made for a singularly impressive first meeting, Will. I find myself deeply desiring to know more about you, if you will permit it.”

Will doesn’t know what to say to that. He scrapes his spoon at the bottom of the glass. When he’d agreed to dinner, he hadn’t yet realized Hannibal was a psychiatrist, and now it’s all he can think about. “Professionally?”

“Personally,” Hannibal assures him. “I will not lie and say that I’m uninterested in the quirks of your mind, but only in how they relate to you yourself. They are a part of you, Will, and as I’ve already said, I will be grateful for whatever parts of yourself you deign to share with company.”

“God,” Will says, scrubbing a hand over his face. He doesn't know what to say to that either. He feels like every time he asks Hannibal a question, he comes out of the conversation with even less information than he had going in. “Yeah. Okay.” He glances down at his empty bowl. “Do you need help with the dishes?”

Hannibal accepts the break in conversation easily. “Your help would not be unappreciated.”

Will gathers their glasses from the table, and Hannibal heads to the kitchen where Will can hear the hiss of the sink filling.

He takes a moment to lean against the table and catch his breath. He’d drunk more than he’d thought, and he can feel the thickness of it crawling along the back of his mind. He doesn’t know whether the heat that seems to be present in every inch of his skin is the alcohol or just Hannibal’s overwhelming presence.

When he joins Hannibal in the kitchen he discovers that he’s once again stripped off his waistcoat, left it folded neatly over the back of the chair in the corner. He’s wrist deep in the

sudsy sink, back to Will, and this time Will pauses to better appreciate the view.

The shirt pulls tightly over the muscles in his shoulders, and is the most delightful contrast against the pink-paleness of the nape of his neck, the ash of his hair.

Will finishes the dregs of wine in the bottom of one of the glasses - he can't tell whose - and approaches. "What can I do?"

Hannibal takes the glasses from him and hands him a clean towel. "You can dry as I wash, if that's alright."

Will shuffles over to take his place beside him, accepting the soapy plate Hannibal immediately passes over. It's easy to fall into a rhythm. Every time Hannibal gives Will a dish, their fingers brush, and it's far too consistent to be accidental.

The warmth of the wine makes Will just brave enough to let the touches happen. And then brave enough to ask, "Is this a date?"

Hannibal doesn't even pause, rinses the last dish and hands it to Will. "Would you like it to be?"

Will's stomach turns over. He can't bear the weight of the question, no matter how innocent it is. "Would *you*?"

"I had hoped," Hannibal admits as Will settles the dish atop the stack. Hannibal pulls the plug free and washes the last of the bubbles from the sink before holding out a hand for the towel. Will hands it to him wordlessly. Hannibal dries his hands and turns to drape it perfectly over the faucet. "I did not want to presume, however."

Will's mouth twists into a wry smile. "Neither did I."

He summons the willpower to make himself glance up and finds that Hannibal is looking at him with something that could only be described as fondness. He hurries to look down, but Hannibal's fingers catch beneath his chin, directing him back up again.

Will manages to hold Hannibal's gaze for a moment before he has to refocus on the rims of his glasses.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?"

Will shrugs. "I find it distracting."

"Am I distracting to you, Will?"

Will makes himself look up and dryly says, "Don't flatter yourself, Doctor Lecter."

He'd expected Hannibal to be put out, but he only looks faintly delighted. The hand cradling Will's chin slips away, and he tries not to mourn its sudden absence.

“It’s getting late,” Hannibal says. “But perhaps it may be best to have some coffee before you leave.”

It’s on the tip of Will’s tongue to argue - his dogs will be hungry, he doesn’t like driving in the dark - but Hannibal’s already turning away, pulling cups from a tall cupboard and starting up the frankly ridiculous coffee machine that dominates the far bench. Will closes his mouth and reluctantly concedes that he’s probably not at his best with the wine making him loose and tipsy, and the caffeine will be a welcome wake up call.

To his surprise, Hannibal doesn’t take them back to the dining room when the coffee is done. Instead, he gently presses Will’s cup into his hands and leads him down the hall to what Will presumes is his home study.

While it’s far from simplicity, it’s perhaps a little less pretentious than some of the other rooms he’s glimpsed so far. Will would dread to see whatever grand display Hannibal turned his psychiatric office into, and is incredibly thankful that he had the chance to meet the man outside of a professional relationship.

There’s a pair of comfortable armchairs tilted just so towards each other, but Will bypasses them and heads for the window instead, feeling suddenly caged in by the unfamiliarity and grandiosity. Hannibal does not comment, grants Will his distance as he settles into the nearer chair, and for that Will is incredibly grateful.

“Forgive me, I haven’t asked how young Marissa is faring.”

Will nods, running a hand through his hair. “She’s fine,” he says. “They think it was a once off occurrence. It happens sometimes, apparently.”

“It does,” Hannibal allows. “It can also be a symptom for a broader issue such as a brain infection.”

Will glances down at his coffee, swirling it into ripples. “Yeah,” he says, trying for casual but failing. “I know.”

“Personal experience?”

Personal experience. That’s one way to put it.

Will remembers so little of those terrible few weeks when his whole world has gone to hell and his brain had caught on fire. He remembers seeing things, people, *creatures*. He remembers the horrified look on Abigail’s face when he’d finally had a seizure in front of her, and she’d had to be the one to take him to hospital.

In hindsight, it seems ludicrous that Will hadn’t realized something was wrong until somebody had been there to bear witness to a fit. At the time, it had seemed nothing more than perfectly natural.

He’d killed a man. Of course his brain was going to punish him for it, what other alternative was there?

“I had severe encephalitis,” Will says. “It took a while before anybody realized. It wasn’t the highpoint of my life.”

“That sounds like stable foundation for a fairly traumatic experience.”

Will can’t help but laugh, glancing up in amusement. “Are you going to psychoanalyze me now, Doctor?”

Hannibal smiles thinly. “It would perhaps seem fair, given the way you profiled me upon our first meeting.”

“Well, you’re a trained professional and I’m an amateur. Seems like there’d be a power imbalance there.”

“I doubt that very much, Will. It is rare I encounter somebody who is so effortlessly my equal.”

There’s something a little dark and greatly arrogant in that statement, but Will cannot help the delighted shiver it gives him. He has found that it is not often people consider him their equal, let alone somebody like *Hannibal* who has the charisma of a monarch or king ready to talk entire armies into dying on his behest.

“You ought to be careful what you say, Hannibal. One day somebody’s going to accuse you of having a god complex.”

The light crow’s feet at the corner of Hannibal’s eyes crinkle when he smiles. Once again, Will gets the impression that he’s sidestepped Hannibal’s expectations of him.

“Well, I wouldn’t have that,” Hannibal says, finishing off his coffee and setting it down with a gentle *chink*. “How are you feeling now?”

Will drains the dregs from his cup. “Better,” he says. “More sober.” He glances out the window where the sun has long since sunk out of sight, painting the sidewalks and roads in an abundance of shadows. Reluctantly, he says, “I should go.”

Hannibal stands, approaching and taking Will’s empty cup to set aside. “Will you be alright to drive?”

“I’ll be fine,” Will assures him.

Hannibal accepts his answer without protest. “I’ll show you to the door.”

In the front hallway, Hannibal helps Will back into his coat despite the fact Will is more than capable of dressing himself. Hannibal’s fingers brush against the nape of his neck, lingering for a second before they withdraw.

The easiness that has slowly seeped into the night is leaving him now, and when Will opens the door he feels terribly awkward. Hannibal watches him wordlessly, one hand braced on the doorframe and the other tucked in his pocket. Waiting on Will.

Will licks his lips. “Thank you for tonight. I had a good time.”

“You sound surprised. I wonder if I should be offended.”

Will snorts, adjusting his glasses. “Sorry,” he says. “I don’t meant to be so… aggressive.”

Hannibal’s hand comes up so quick that Will doesn't see it, doesn't even have the time to flinch away. He tucks one of Will’s errant curls behind his ear, and the way his thumb strokes Will’s skin is far from subtle. “I would not call you aggressive, Will. Defensive, perhaps. Certainly prickly. But I enjoy those aspects of your company as well.”

Will’s throat feels very dry, Hannibal’s words a wash of warmth along all the sore parts of himself that ache from the tension of bracing for the worst. He wonders if anybody has ever said that to him before, has told him plainly that his personality is fine the way it is.

He draws a blank.

Fuck it, he thinks.

He reaches out and gently twists his hands in Hannibal’s waistcoat, broadcasting his intentions clearly. Hannibal’s eyes glitter in the dark and he allows Will to pull him forward, leaning down as Will leans up, their mouths meeting warmly.

It has been an age since Will last kissed somebody, and he is incredibly conscious of it as he awkwardly opens his mouth, but if Hannibal is in the least put-off by Will’s rusty experience, he does not show it. He keeps one hand against the doorframe, and settles the other on the back of Will’s neck, guiding them together flawlessly.

He tastes hot like coffee, and smooth like expensive wine. Will thinks he could get drunk again just off this much, and it’s with obvious reluctance that he pulls away, licking his lips compulsively. Hannibal’s eyes follow the flicker of his tongue, but he does nothing more than run his thumb soothingly along the nape of Will’s neck.

“May I call you again?” Hannibal asks.

Will is far too old to feel giddy at the request, but he come daringly close. “You may.”

Hannibal smiles again, and it’s a slow, hungry thing that makes the late-night shadows on his face seem sharp enough to be almost cruel. “Thank you for your company,” he says. “Goodnight, Will. Drive safe.”

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

Will tucks his hands in his coat and leaves. He does not permit himself to look back until he’s in the car, unable to stop himself from glancing at the rearview mirror.

Hannibal is still standing in the open doorway, and although the distance is too far for Will to make out his expression, he has the impression that Hannibal knows Will is looking. He swallows and tears his gaze away, turning the key in the ignition and pulling out of Hannibal’s driveway before he does something stupid.

The drive back to Wolf Trap flies by, lost in the replay of the night. Will is sorting through it methodically, testing it for weaknesses against the knife-edge of his empathy, trying to find the lie hidden behind Hannibal's words.

He'd been glad to have Will there; that had been the truth. He'd enjoyed kissing him, too. Will can still see the almost victorious flicker in his expression when Will had reached for him on the doorstep.

Will is not so stupid as to think that a man like Hannibal Lecter comes without complications - not when he can still remember the coveting hunger he'd glimpsed in the store - but he tentatively allows himself to believe that Hannibal had meant, if not all, then at least a great deal of the conversation they'd shared.

By the time he arrives home, Will is both exhausted and almost deliriously happy. The dogs greet him at the door, barking cheerfully and circling around his ankles. He feeds them and lets them out in the yard for a quick run before bed.

He showers, washing away the tension - both good and bad - of the evening. The warmth of Hannibal's lingering touches are lost beneath the soap, but Will remembers each and every one of them fondly.

He dresses, lets the dogs back in, and crawls into bed, yawning widely.

Generously, he thinks he might open the shop late tomorrow. It's been a long night, and he feels as if he deserves a day to himself, to enjoy the last of his good mood before it's swept away against the battering of his constant misanthropy.

He drops off to sleep surprisingly easy. To say he sleeps well would be a lie, but he does not dream, and that is a gift in and of itself.

--

Will wakes to the sound of somebody banging on his door.

For a moment, he lays in a confused heap in the bed, staring at the mildew stained ceiling and wondering if he's hallucinating again, because it's - he glances at the bedside clock - six in the morning on a Thursday, and he can't think of a single damn person who'd make the trip out to see him.

The dogs are barking, pawing at the door, and reluctantly Will peels himself out of the sheets, shrugging into a ratty gown.

It takes him several tries to unlock the door, but when he throws it open he wishes he'd just stayed in bed.

"I'm sorry, Will," says Jack Crawford, who is standing on Will's doorstep and looking exactly the same as the last time Will saw him, nearly two years ago now. "I can promise you I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here."

"What do you want, Jack?"

Jack sighs, rubbing his thumb along the exhausted stubble lining his jaw. Will's heart sinks like a stone, and he knows exactly what Jack is going to say a split second before he opens his mouth.

"There's been another murder. One of yours. Looks like you've got a new fan."

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so very much for the positive response to this fic! i wasn't certain how it'd go over, but the lovely comments i've gotten have more than given me the energy to continue. i hope this fic continues to live up to your expectations, and feel free to drop by at any of the social media listed below.

twitter: @doingwritebyme
tumblr: glenflower

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting beside Jack on the way to what will no doubt be a truly gruesome crime scene would be almost nostalgic if Will could only figure out how to breathe through the crushing ache in his ribs.

Jack's talking, filling him in on all the details, but Will can hardly hear him.

"- discovered by housekeeping when she came to clean the room for check-in later this morning."

Will swallows, pressing his sweaty forehead against the chilly window pane, as if it could chase out the phantom feeling of fire crawling the perimeter of his skull.

"Will?" Will jerks back to awareness. Jack is watching him with narrowed, concerned eyes. "Will, are you with me?"

"Watch the road," Will says hoarsely, rubbing at his fogged-up glasses.

He expects Jack to argue, but his mouth presses into a thin line and he directs his gaze back out the windshield. Will is incredibly, viciously glad for the chance to finish his minute breakdown in relative privacy.

Eventually, they pull up out front of a small, roadside motel. It's surrounded by flashing cop cars, and sick looking officers. Will supposes that bodes well for what's waiting for them inside. The only bright spot is the glimpse of dark hair Will catches.

Beverly is waiting by the door when Will climbs out of the car, and she wastes no time sweeping him into a brief but consuming hug. "Hey, Will," she says with a weak grin. "When I said I wanted to see more of your dumb face this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Yeah," Will sighs. "Me either."

She punches him in the shoulder, just hard enough that he'll be feeling it for the new few hours. "You don't have to go in there, you know that right?"

Will cranes his neck to glance over his shoulder. Jack is held up talking with one of the uniformed officers, face expressionless. "Sure doesn't feel like that."

"Seriously, I can talk to Jack. You're a civilian, he can't drag you into a crime scene against your will."

"Jack does whatever he thinks is best," Will say, which isn't as diplomatic as he intended. "Look, it's… it's fine. I'll be fine."

“But -”

“I need to see this, Bev,” Will says. “For me. Not just for Jack.”

She looks fit to argue with him, but footsteps announce Jack’s approach. “Are you ready, Will?”

Will is not ready. He wants to be back in bed enjoying his first dreamless sleep in weeks. He wants to be stumbling bleary-eyed into the store, debating whether it’s too soon to text Hannibal without coming off as desperate.

He adjusts his glasses. “Yeah,” he says. “Show it to me.”

Beverly watches them unhappily as Jack leads their way into the room, dismissing the officers by the door with a nod. They go without arguing, casting Will a curious look. Will doesn’t return it. All his attention is focused on the display before him.

“I’ll be outside,” Jack says, and Will nodes mutely. Faintly, he hears the door close, and suddenly he is alone in the room with the most horrific and beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

When Garrett Jacob Hobbs had killed in his name, Will had found the crime scenes awful, of course, but they’d also been… tasteless. They’d been perfect physical duplicates, but nothing more. The emotion in the room had been all wrong; too tender, too *loving*. There had been honour in his kills, the delicate way he’d posed the victims with the familial touch of a father.

Will’s kills had never been about that. The monster in his books had no need for such emotions, could not abide by the sheer banality of the human condition. Will’s monster was merciless, curious - cruel and dismissive by turns.

Will had never admitted as much, not to his friends and not to the press, but when Will wrote his kills he didn’t write them as murder - he had written them as *art*.

This, he thinks, standing shaking in the middle of the room, *is art.*

The body on the bed belongs to a middle-aged man, naked and sitting cross legged on the covers with the pillows behind his back holding him upright. It would be unremarkable if not for the fact somebody had sawn the top of his head off and turned the cap of his skull into a bowl, the cleaned cavity of his head filled with elegantly arranged flowers.

Will steps closer on instinct alone, drawn in by the poetic beauty of it all. The killer had been very careful; Will can see no immediate splintering along the edges of the bone-bowl, and now that he’s nearer he sees it’s filled to the brim with water, the surface flat and undisturbed.

The man looks like he’s mediating, eyes glassy as he stares sightlessly down into the water. Will knows exactly the precision that would have gone into posing him like this, and he can’t help but feel slightly awed, even as he has to fist his hands to stop the trembles in his fingertips.

He doesn’t want to close his eyes and let the pendulum swing. Both because he is terrified of what it’ll show him, and because a sick part of himself doesn’t want to miss a second of this

display.

“Jack,” Will calls. His voice is croaky and he clears his throat, trying again. “Jack.”

The door swings back open so fast that Will knows Jack has been waiting just outside, near enough to eavesdrop. “Talk to me, Will. What do you see?”

Will tears his eyes away with force he didn’t know he possessed. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears, and each breath pains his chest. “It’s one of mine,” he says. He offers a shaky grin. “But I guess you already knew that.”

Jack doesn’t smile back. “One of the first responders is a reader of yours,” he says. He steps closer, studying the scene grimly. “He recognized your signature right away.”

“I didn’t kill this man, Jack,” Will says sharply. “Just because I *designed* this doesn’t mean I *did* it.”

Jack’s mouth flattens into a thin line and instantly Will knows what he’s going to ask next. “Where -”

“Christ almighty, Jack,” Will cuts in, and he can’t help the slightly hysterical laugh that escapes him. “Where was I last night? You want to do this again? *Really?* After last time?”

“You know I have to ask,” Jack says, but he at least has the grace to look chagrined. “I’m not saying you did it, Will. We’ve been through this before. I’m sorry, but given your proximity to the subject matter, you’re a suspect by default.” Jack takes in a breath and adds, “Now, I know you probably don’t have anybody to give you an alibi -”

“I was out last night,” Will says, with perhaps more venom than he means to. He knows Jack hadn’t meant offence, but the assumption rankles him. “I was having dinner with a friend.”

Jack looks momentarily surprised but he covers it well. “And this friend can vouch for you?”

Will gut turns.

One date. Dinner, and a kiss goodbye on Hannibal’s doorstep - that was all Will had managed to wring out of this mess before it crashed and burned. He can just imagine Hannibal’s reaction when he gets a call from the head of the BAU at the FBI asking if he can assure them that Will Graham had not killed a man last night, if he would be so kind.

Well, if Hannibal hadn’t known who he was before all this, he certainly would now. Will gives it until midday, at most, before his name is all over the papers again.

For a second, Will thinks of lying. Of taking back his alibi and telling Jack that no, actually, he didn’t have anybody to vouch for him. He’d been at home with his dogs after all, same old Will Graham story. He might have, if it would have made any difference at all.

Hannibal reads TattleCrime, he’d said so himself, and Freddie Lounds was going to have her dirty paws all over this story in no time flat.

Will sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose and knocking his glasses askew. “Hannibal,” he says reluctantly. “Doctor Hannibal Lecter. Do you want me to give you his number or do you think you can handle looking it up?”

“Will,” Jack chides, as if he is a child. “I’m just doing my job.”

“Does doing your job mean dragging your prime suspect to the scene of his own supposed murder?”

“*Will*.”

Will glances up, forces himself to make eye contact. Jack looks exhausted, and irritated, and, beneath it all, faintly sorry. He doesn’t think Will did this, not really. He’s right - he’s just doing his damn job.

That doesn’t make Will feel any better.

He turns back to the murder, fixating on the bouquet beautifully arranged where the man’s brain should have been. “You can bring Beverly and the others in now,” he says. “I already know how this man died, replaying it isn’t going to give us anything new.”

Jack looks doubtful, but he has no legal hold over Will, and if Will says he won’t do his pretty little parlour trick, Jack can’t make him. “Don’t touch the body,” he warns, before stepping back out into the freezing morning.

Will huffs, tucking his hands in his pockets and idly stepping a little closer. There’s no sign of a struggle anywhere, he can’t help but note. Normally he would have assumed that meant the man had been dead before he was taken here and posed, but Will doesn’t think so.

He steps closer. The man's eyes are wide and glassy, and what little of his expression isn’t slack in death shows the remnants of rapturous agony. Beneath the line of his jaw, Will can see a small bruise left by a syringe.

This man had been alive when the killer had started sawing into his skull. He might have been alive up until his brain was pulled gently and carefully free.

The door bangs open again, and Will flinches, turning around to see the forensics crew knocking snow off their shoes at the threshold.

“Hey, Graham,” Zeller says, sounding far too perky for both the time and location. “Honestly, I was hoping I wouldn’t see your ugly mug at another one of my crime scenes.”

Will smiles thinly, stepping back and making room for them. “Yeah,” he says. “I guess neither of us got what we wanted.”

Price offers him a consoling pat on the shoulder as he passes by, and Beverly’s hand briefly encircles his wrist to give it a short, comforting squeeze. Will can’t help but feel somewhat bolstered by it.

“So,” Jack says, looming behind the lot of them. “Anything you want to share about this case, Will?”

Will scrubs a hand along his chin. “It’s different than before,” he admits.

Zeller snorts, head popping up from where he’s crouched behind the bed. “Yeah, no *shit*. The last guy we caught killing people in your name ended up with ten bullets in his chest.”

“*Zee*,” Beverly says, swatting his arm.

“What? I’m just saying the truth.”

Will takes in a deep, foul breath and lets it out again. He’s long since over his sickness, but a part of him is always waiting for Hobbs to crawl out of the corner at the first mention of his name, dragging his bony fingers through Will’s mind and turning it back into mush.

He’s dead, Will reminds himself. *He’s dead, and you’re not sick anymore. It’s fine. You’re fine*.

“That’s not what I meant,” he says. “Hobbs let his own emotions guide his murders. They were, in his eyes, *a kindness*. This isn’t like that. This is - this is as close to the murder in my books as you could possibly get. I don’t know how to explain it other than it feels *dismissive*.”

“Dismissive? What does that mean, exactly?” Jack does not look impressed.

Will shrugs. “You asked me what I saw, and that’s what I see. Whoever did this - this isn’t the first time they’ve killed. Not even close to it.”

Silence falls for a moment, and then Price says, “So what? You’re telling me we’re looking at an established serial killer, not a baby new one like Hobbs?”

Will opens his mouth to answer, but his attention is stolen away by Beverly who has gently lifted the bone-bowl from the corpse’s hands, exposing a better view of his stomach. There, just below the right ribs, Will can see a line of neat stitching. “What’s that?”

Beverly glances up at him, startled, and then back down. “I don’t know, but it’s fresh.” She runs a gloved finger along the sutures. “Very fresh. Happened-last-night fresh.”

A realization is dawning on Will, heavy and awful. “That’s not my design,” he murmurs, stepping closer. “Open him.”

“Will -”

“*Open him*.”

Beverly looks helplessly to Jack. Jack looks to Will. And then he nods. “Do it.”

Will watches silently as Beverly carefully cuts through the stitching. The stomach opens like a ripe fruit beneath her touch, the edges of the wound even and firm. Beverly doesn’t even

glance up as she passes the sheers back to Zeller, and wiggles her hand into the wound. "What am I looking for here?"

"You'll know," Will says, "when you don't find it."

Zeller looks up at him, frowning. "What the fuck is that supposed to -"

Beverly lets out a breath, eyes wide. "His kidney," she says, still wrist deep in the body. "I can't find it, Jack. It's gone."

Every eye in the room turns to Will. "Is that part of your design, Will?" Jack asks.

Will laughs, scrubbing both hands over his face. "No," he says. "But it's part of the Ripper's."

--

He calls Abigail while he's sitting in the car, waiting for Jack to remember he exists and come take him away from civilization.

"*Will?"*

Despite himself, Will smiles, just a little. Abigail's influence isn't enough to draw all the tension out of him, but it softens the ragged edges inside that are rubbing him raw. "Hey, did I wake you?"

Abigail yawns. "*It's fine, I should be up by now, anyway. Do you need my help at the shop?*"

The wistful dust of Will's good mood whisks away. "No, I'm not opening the shop today." There's no gentle way to say it, and Abigail wouldn't appreciate it if he tried to soften the blow. "There's been another murder, Abigail."

He can hear her sharp inhale, and he winces. Out of all the things he expects her to say, it is not, "*Are you alright?*"

Will laughs. "Me? I'm fine, I'm worried about you. "

"*My father's dead*," Abigail says. "*Unless somebody thinks his ghost is out there committing fresh murders, this time it has nothing to do with me."*

Will rubs his thumb against the icy window, watching as Jack finally steps from the motel room, conversing seriously with the uniformed officers. "No," Will says softly. "This was nothing like your dad."

A pause and then Abigail says, "*Jack took you to the scene, didn't he?*"

"First thing this morning," Will admits. "He wanted my opinion."

Abigail makes a deeply frustrated noise. "*And an alibi, I'll bet."*

Will thinks of admitting to her that he'd actually had one, for a change, but decides against it. Chances are good that he won't be seeing Hannibal again, and she'll be absolutely impossible if she knows they'd had dinner.

It's barely eight in the morning, and Will is already overloading. He doesn't know if he has the strength to have that conversation on top of everything else.

"Jack knows I didn't do it," he says. "He's just being thorough."

Abigail's silence is answer enough. She's never liked Jack. Will knows she blames him in no small part for how long it'd taken to catch her father - for how long she'd been left to live in fear of him.

There's a rap at the window Will is leaning on and he startles furiously, very nearly dropping his phone. He turns and catches sight of blood red curls and bright green eyes. The look of Freddie's smug smile makes him feel sicker than anything back in that motel room ever could have.

"I'll call you back, Abigail," Will says, and hangs up. He cracks the window, just enough to speak, and says, "Fuck off."

"Will," she says sweetly, adjusting her scarf. "What a surprise to see you here. What could the FBI possibly want the input of a humble bookstore owner for?"

Will doesn't need to have the incredible empathy he does to read that glint in her eyes. If Freddie hasn't already somehow snuck inside the motel room, at the very least she knows exactly what's in there.

"You're trespassing," Will says, instead of the countless other things vying to come out. "This is a federal crime scene. If Crawford has to throw you out, he won't be pleased."

"Oh, I'm not worried about Jack Crawford," she says loftily. "But while I have you here, would you like to offer me a comment, Will?"

Will looks down his glasses at her and gives his most unimpressed glare. "I have nothing to say to you."

Freddie laughs. "Cute," she says. "If you were smart, Will, you would use me. The story's going to break, no matter who writes it. If we work together though, you could have a say in it. You could -"

Will cranks the window back up, muffling the last of her offer. Will has heard the words a dozen time before, has sat there silent and fuming while she tried to seduce Abigail into this exact same deal.

He has no interesting in making deals with the devil, let alone whatever spawn of hell Freddie Lounds is.

She smiles at him through the glass one more time, turns to see Jack approaching with a thundercloud expression, and beats a strategic retreat. She's already climbing back into her

own car by the time Jack throws the driver's side door open.

"I have no idea how that woman keeps turning up like clockwork," Jack grunts. "She's a bloodhound, I swear."

Will lets his head fall back on the headrest. His phone vibrates against his thigh, but Will doesn't have the strength to check it. "Take me home, Jack," Will says.

Jack hesitates. "There's still the autopsy."

"If it's the Ripper, you won't find any evidence," Will says bluntly. "Maybe some extra missing organs, but I doubt it. He's already got the brain and the kidney. Anymore would be against his profile."

Jack's gloved fingers flex around the wheel. "Are you sure it's the Ripper?" Jack presses. "You've never even seen a Ripper scene."

Will rolls his head to give Jack his most aggrieved look. "I wrote seven books about graphic murder. That requires at least a little bit of research, Jack. And I know how to use google. The Ripper's one of the most prolific serial killers of our age; it's not exactly hard to find crime scene photographs."

"And according to you, he's your biggest fan. Do you understand exactly how big of a deal that is, Will? We need you to be sure - *I* need you to be sure."

Will chances a glance at Jack's eyes, and then looks just up and to the left of his shoulder. "The profile fits," he says softly. "He copied everything absolutely perfectly; the only reason he would have taken that kidney was to make sure we knew exactly who we were dealing with. And I've never seen another serial killer half as elegant as the Ripper."

Will knows he's misspoken even as Jack asks, "Elegant? Is that how you see this murder?"

"It's how the Ripper sees it," Will says quickly to cover the dryness in his throat. "There's a theatricality in the Ripper murders. Out of all the designs in my books, he's picked arguably the most iconographic. And he stitched the victim back up after he took the kidney, that's intentional. He wanted it to be the first thing we noticed."

The first thing I noticed, Will corrects silently, but can't make himself say aloud.

Jack's expression is sour but he starts the car. Will can't help but let out a relieved breath as the heaters rumble back on. He can't feel his fingers, and selfishly hoards the heat.

"Are you sure you don't want to be there for the autopsy?"

"Yes," Will says, biting back his impatience. "I've got a phone. You can try calling me if you need me for anything. Take me home, Jack."

--

Will arrives home just before nine. Jack drops him at the end of the driveway and declines Will's weak offer for coffee. Will doesn't bother hiding his relief.

The dogs crowd around him as he fights his way back in and he pauses to give each of them their due affection before he forces his aching body to the kitchen to feed them. They're quick to abandon him for their bowls, and Will slouches back into the living room, collapsing on the bed.

He's exhausted, but his mind is going a mile an hour. Every time he closes his eyes he's back in the motel room, staring at the offering the Ripper had left him and trying his hardest not to step close enough to touch.

A sweaty shiver chases along his skin and Will barely manages to rip himself from the bed and stumble to the bathroom in time. He throws up the last of Hannibal's fancy dinner, clutching weakly at the toilet bowl and shaking something fierce.

His phone vibrates in his pocket, and Will spits out a mouthful of stringy bile before he fumbles for it. He'd all but forgotten the text he'd gotten in Jack's car, had assumed it would just be Abigail.

It isn't.

Hannibal
Good morning, Will. I enjoyed dinner last night. Please let me know if I may call you this evening.

Two hours ago, Will probably would have been positively giddy at the message. Right now he just feels painfully hollowed out. With a sense of mounting dread, he scrolls to the newer message.

Hannibal
I've seen the news. May I call?

Jesus fuck. *May I call?* How is Will supposed to respond to that? He can get nothing else from the message, just the careful absence of anything that could be misread. A deliberate choice, he'd bet. Hannibal strikes him as the kind of man who does not enjoy conversation he cannot direct.

Carefully, Will punches out his reply.

if you want. you don't have to.

Gingerly, he levers himself to his feet. He brushes his teeth aggressively until all he can taste is the faint hint of blood, and then rinses until he can taste nothing at all. He runs his hands through his sweaty hair and very carefully does not look in the mirror.

The phone rings just as he's climbing back into bed. For a second, he experiences a visceral and irrational fear that it's Jack - it's not. It is, of course, Hannibal. Will doesn't know why he doubted.

“I told you that you didn’t have to,” Will says, by way of greeting.

“*So I saw,”* Hannibal says. “*May I come over?*”

Out of all the things Will had expected him to say, that had not been even remotely close to consideration. He rolls over, trying to organize his thoughts. “Why?”

“*Because I would like to see you*,” Hannibal says, as if it’s that simple. “*I think you shouldn’t be alone right now, and also that this is perhaps a conversation we might have face to face*.”

“Don’t you have patients today?”

He can hear a faint rustle on the other end, the swish of Hannibal’s fine suit moving. “*Not until later this afternoon. I will not be putting myself out for you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”*

Will can’t help but laugh, rubbing a hand over his face. “I think it’s safe to say I have any number of worries right now.”

“*Is that a no? I would not wish to inconvenience you, Will.”*

“No,” Will says, a little helpless to the hypnotic warmth of Hannibal’s voice. “It’s not a no. If you want to drive out to the middle of nowhere, I’m not going to stop you. I don’t know if I’m going to be the best company right now.”

“*My desire to see you is not conditional upon your state of being, especially not in the wake of what I’m sure has been a very stressful morning for you*.”

This does not sound remotely like the breakup conversation Will had been preparing for, if it could truly be called a breakup after a single date. Will thinks it could be. It’s the closest he’s gotten to a relationship for many, many years now.

“Yeah, alright,” he says, giving up the fight. “You got a pen for my address?” Hannibal gives him a noise of confirmation, and Will rattles it off for him. “You really don’t have to come though.”

“*Will,”* says Hannibal, “*I am not often in the habit of doing things I do not wish to do. Don’t concern yourself with that.”*

He hangs up before Will can get another word in edgewise, and Will lies on the mess of his sheets, staring at the ceiling. Swallowing, he manages to shoulder himself out of bed. At least tidying the house so as not to be a total embarrassment would give him something to focus on other than the phantom feeling of blood on his fingertips.

He’s in the middle of sweeping the dog hair out of the kitchen when he hears a soft, mechanical purr from the driveway. He glances out the window and sees Hannibal’s Bentley pulling up, incredibly incongruous with the barren surroundings of Will’s front yard.

Will lets out a breath, tucks the broom away, and goes to greet him at the door.

The dogs are already there, barked cheerfully and climbing over each other to get a look at their visitor. Will whistles and jerks his thumb back towards the fireplace and they retreat, but not without a few curious tail wags.

Hannibal looks amused when Will opens the door, eyeing the pack over his shoulder. “If I had known about your dogs, I would have brought breakfast for them too.”

“Sorry,” Will says. “I should probably have mentioned that.” His brain catches up with the rest of that sentence and he blurts, “Breakfast?”

In answer, Hannibal holds up an insulated cooler bag and a thick thermos. “I assumed you had not had the chance to eat yet. May I have the use of your kitchen?”

Will is still too confused to do anything but step back, allowing Hannibal into the house. “I thought you came here to talk.”

“I came here to check in on you,” Hannibal corrects, gently guiding Will in the direction of his own kitchen with a kind hand to his elbow. “We may talk about this only if you feel up to discussion, but I see no reason we can’t do it over a warm meal.”

Will has a small, battered table in the corner of his kitchen, and Hannibal deposits him in one of the mismatched chairs there easily. He turns to the kitchen, setting the cooler bag atop a bench and taking out an expensive looking tupperware container from it. The smell when he cracks the lid is positively divine.

“I’m sure my kitchen doesn’t measure up to your standards,” Will says. “But you’re welcome to use it.”

Hannibal offers him a pleased smile. “This will only be a moment,” he says. “It just needs to be reheated.”

Where Will would have simply stuck it in the microwave, Hannibal reheats it in a heavy pan, leaving Will with a mug of the coffee from the thermos. It’s warm and rich, far more decadent than anything he’d ever buy for himself, and it gives him an incredibly visceral sense memory of the previous night, standing in Hannibal’s study and smiling at each other like they were sharing secrets.

He glances up to see Hannibal tipping the scramble from the pan onto plates. Hannibal’s gaze catches his, and Will looks quickly away, sipping almost desperately from his mug. When Hannibal sets his plate in front of him, Will is surprised to find the remnants of an appetite stirring inside his gut. “Smells good. What is it?”

“A protein scramble,” Hannibal says calmly, handing Will a fork. “I thought something simple and warm might be best.”

Will doesn’t say that he’d have eaten anything Hannibal had put in front of him. He forks up some sausage and takes a bite and is unsurprised to find it positively delectable. He takes another mouthful and then clears his throat. “This is good. Thanks.”

He can just see Hannibal's small smile from the corner of his eye. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. It seems the least I can offer in the wake of your morning."

Tension crawls back into Will, electric fast. He stares at his plate, the yellow of the egg yolks and the browning of the sausages. "I… I wasn't sure if you knew who I was."

Hannibal's knife gently scrapes the side of his plate. "I thought as much," he says. "It occurred to me that perhaps broaching the subject of your fame and your past might make you uncomfortable."

Will bristles. "It's not *fame*," he says, a little too harshly for such a gentle observation.

"Oh?" Hannibal says, completely undisturbed. "What would you call it then?"

Will pushes absently at the scramble, buying time. His heart is already picking up its pace, lured out of its false sense of security. This is never a conversation Will likes to have, although he can appreciate the necessity of it. "I just wrote some books," he says. "Everything that came after that had nothing to do with me."

"I believe you're underselling yourself immensely to call your work 'some books', but I agree with the rest of your statement. You wrote the most insightful crime books ever to grace the literary world, but what Garret Jacob Hobbs made of that work had nothing to do with you."

A tense part of Will relaxes, just a little. He feels… vindicated, maybe, to have Hannibal tell him that the murders and Hobbs weren't his fault. He isn't the first to say so, of course, but he's perhaps the first to sound as if he genuinely means it.

Will has to take whatever little victories he can get. That aside, he can't help but focus on the peculiar definition of his work. "You've read my writing?"

Hannibal is silent for a moment, and Will makes himself look up. He's rewarded with a glimpse of fond curiosity in Hannibal's dark eyes. It flusters him more than it should and he looks sharply down to his near-empty plate.

"I will admit," Hannibal says, "that although I followed the copycat murders in the news, I did not read your books at the time. An oversight on my behalf, I'm afraid. After having become acquainted, it seemed prudent."

Will doesn't want to ask, but he can't stop himself. "What did you think?"

Hannibal is quiet as he considers, and Will grips his cutlery tight enough to hurt. "I think," Hannibal says, "that the mind that produced such art must be an extraordinary thing, and I cannot fathom my incredible fortune for being allowed near enough to have the chance to know it."

Will is used to his mind being coveted by the psychiatric world in general - coveted by Jack, and the rest of the BAU, who had tried headhunting Will even back when he was nothing

more than fresh blood in the New Orleans PD. He is not used to, he thinks, the respectful admiration in Hannibal's voice.

Will's books are a critical success. He's had a cult following since the first one hit the shelves. He's heard all kinds of things over the years about his writing, both praise and condemnation, but the common thread had always been the same.

He remembers incredibly clearly the first review that ever made it into the papers.

Will Graham's books are an experience in hypnotic revulsion, it'd said. *Never before has the mind of a killer been so thoroughly laid bare. The horror and the fascination are one and the same. One must wonder what it must be like to live alongside the kind of terror that Graham puts to page.*

That review had launched his career. Will had never forgotten the emptiness that last line had left in his gut.

Will can't bring himself to look up. The word 'art' slipping from Hannibal's tongue is still ringing in his ears. "I don't think many people would agree with you," he says.

"Your books consistently topped best seller lists upon every release. I find that hard to believe."

The smile Will manages to summon is tight and sharp. "People are fascinated by that which they don't understand," he says. "Nobody genuinely enjoyed reading my books. It made them too uncomfortable. It was the illicit thrill of being privy to that which society has forbidden that convinced them otherwise."

"You're your own harshest critic, Will," Hannibal says softly. "But perhaps I do not think you are entirely wrong."

Relief again, flooding him quick enough to choke. It's frightening how well Hannibal seems to understand him. *Three days,* Will reminds himself. *You haven't even known him for a week. Don't let your desperation for company cloud your judgement.*

Quietly, Will thinks it might be a bit late for that.

Hannibal stands, clearing the dishes from the table. Will goes to join him, but Hannibal gently pushes him back into the seat, refilling his mug and pressing it into his hands. "Sit, please. I have this."

"You cooked," Will protests. "At the very least, I should -"

"You should," Hannibal says in a voice that brokers no arguments, "sit and rest. Let me do this, please."

Reluctantly, Will does. He stays at the table, watching Hannibal gently shoulder out of his jacket, hanging it over the back of his own chair, and rolling up his sleeves before he fills the sink. The sight of Hannibal's bare arms is incredibly distracting, and Will forces himself to look back at the scratched tabletop.

The gentle sound of the dishwater and the lighter clatter as Hannibal washes is oddly relaxing, and despite his best intentions Will can feel himself slipping closer and closer to sleep. He runs at a constant level of exhaustion even on his best days, and he'd slept so well last night until Jack had woken him. He wants that again, and he doesn't have the strength to hold back.

He yawns, settling against his folded arms atop the table and closes his eyes for a just a moment, savouring the feeling. He must doze, although he couldn't say for certain how long, because eventually he feels a light touch on his shoulder. Stirring, Will asks, "Finished?"

Hannibal's eyes trace the shape of his face, and he gently reaches out to push Will's hair from his eyes. "You're tired, still."

"A little," Will mumbles. "To be fair, I usually am, murders or not."

"I should have let you rest," Hannibal says. "But after I saw Freddie Lounds's article, I found that my desire to check in on you was greater."

Will groans, letting his head drop back to the table. "God, that woman's a vulture. What did she post?"

"I would not advise reading it in your present state," Hannibal says diplomatically, which is as good as an answer as any.

"She accused me, didn't she?"

"She implied a connection beyond the obvious," Hannibal admits.

Will sighs and sits upright again, rubbing at his sore neck. "Jack's probably going to call you," he says, because now is as good a time as any. "To check my alibi."

"Of course," Hannibal says. "I'm only glad I'm available to give it."

Will looks up, studying him, trying to sought out how best to phrase his question. "You don't… I thought this would upset you more."

"Upset me?" Hannibal's brows rise. "The burden is unfortunately yours to bear, not mine. I don't see how it should upset me."

Will swallows and thumbs nervously along one of the hitches in the tabletop. "I meant that I wouldn't have been surprised if you didn't plan to have anything more to do with me after this," he says. "Most people wouldn't."

Hannibal frowns, just ever so slightly. "Are you speaking from experience?"

Will shrugs and looks away. "Not really," he says. "Assumption, I suppose. It makes sense."

Hannibal's face is very carefully blank. Will scans it, trying his best to dig some kind of expression out, but comes up empty. Eventually, Hannibal says, "You're tired, and this table is not the kindest substitute for a proper bed."

Will accepts the subject change easily. He doesn't really want to talk about it anyway. It'd been bad enough thinking it, and Hannibal had brought him breakfast, had talked to him in such a way that Will doesn't think anybody before him ever has. He's in loathe to put a damper on that.

"I can stay awake," he says. "Jack's probably going to call later anyway."

"Nevertheless," Hannibal says and helps Will from the chair even though he doesn't need the assistance. Hannibal's steadying hands on his waist feel incredibly comforting. "Will you be alright on your own?"

Will snorts, forcing himself to step away from Hannibal's clinical embrace. "I'll be fine," he says. "This isn't my first rodeo." He offers Hannibal a twisted smile. "Do you suppose the second time is easier?"

"Is there any proof that this is the beginnings of another serial killer? Could it not just be an isolated murder?"

That answers the question as to whether Freddie Lounds and the rest of the media had learnt of the Ripper's suspected involvement yet, Will supposes. He's glad, honestly. He doesn't even want to imagine the shit storm that'll be. Will can barely stand to think about it himself.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," Will says. "Just… just for now. I want to be done thinking about it."

Hannibal doesn't even flinch. "As you wish," he says. "Do you have anything else you intend to do today?"

Will shrugs. "I guess I'll be sitting by the phone waiting for Jack to call every five minutes to demand my opinion. I'll have to call Abigail later, too."

"You're not opening the store? Good." Hannibal brushes one hand over Will's wrist before he turns back to the bench, packing his cleaned tupperware into his bag. "Would you object if I came back later tonight with dinner?"

Will opens his mouth, finds he can't think of anything to say, and closes it again. He wants to say *no*. He doesn't need to be carefully coddled like this. He's fine. He's *fine*. But he also wants to say *yes*, and that's even worse.

Three days, he reminds himself. *You barely know each other.*

Hannibal turns, glancing at Will over his shoulder with a raised brow. Will finds the energy to say, "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Hannibal looks more amused than offended, even though Will is sure he's not used to people questioning him like that. "In what way?"

Will can't keep eye contact and drops his gaze to the blinding patterns of Hannibal's suit, the neat knot of his tie. His fingers ache to tug at it, and he folds them carefully into fists. "It's a

lot, isn't it? I mean, what do we really know about each other?" He shrugs uncomfortably. "Don't you think this is all moving very fast?"

Hannibal turns to face him, back to the bench and hands gently clasped along the edge of it. "Is that what you think?"

"Intellectually, it's true."

"Let me rephrase," Hannibal says, mouth quirking slightly. "Is that how you *feel*?"

"Don't psychoanalyze me," Will warns.

Hannibal holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "No psychoanalysis," he promises. "Just a mere question. If you don't want me to come back, of course I will grant you your space. I ask only because I find myself wanting to return and offer you my support."

Hannibal's admission wrong-foots him and Will struggles to think of a response that doesn't give away the hungry, yawning feeling in his gut. "Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to sound so … accusatory. I'm just unused to people actively seeking me out for anything other than my professional opinion, I think."

"While I'm sure your profession opinion is invaluable, I promise I'm interested in nothing more than your company."

Despite himself, Will grins. He takes a small, self-conscious step forward. "Oh, is that all?"

Hannibal indulges him with a small smile and reaches out to catch his hands around Will's waist, drawing him closer. "Well, perhaps a little more than your company," he says, raising one hand to gently grasp Will's jaw. His eyes flick down to Will's lips, and his mouth follows a moment later.

This morning standing in the motel room watching his whole world begin to come down around him again, Will would have said intimacy was the last thing he could stand right now. It might have even been true then, but the gentle warmth of Hannibal's touch washes it away quickly.

It's unhurried and gentle, very much like the kiss they'd shared on Hannibal's doorstep. A part of Will aches to make it rougher, to feel the dig of Hannibal's fingers in his skin, but he knows he's probably not in the right headspace to be making those kind of choices.

It's good, though. Will thinks he could stay like this for hours, the slow movement of Hannibal's fingers along his jaws, the hungry taste of his mouth, the clutching hand on his hip, far more possessive than it probably should be so soon in their relationship.

Will tentatively reaches up and folds his fingers around Hannibal's tie. He can feel the curve of Hannibal's smile against his mouth, but he makes no move to stop him, even though Will is sure he's wrinkling the gentle silk irreversibly.

Eventually, Hannibal pulls away. Will follows him for one more kiss, and Hannibal grants it, but gently eases him back. "I'm afraid if I don't leave now I may not leave at all," he says.

“You could stay,” Will offers.

Hannibal cards a hand through Will’s hair, almost as gentle as his kiss. “I think that would be a bad idea,” he says. “I think you agree, too.”

Will does, although incredibly reluctantly. He steps back and Hannibal’s hands linger for a second before they fall away. “You can come back this evening, if you want.”

“Let me know if your plans change,” Hannibal says. “I’m malleable.”

Will watches him as he slides the strap of his bag over his shoulder, and picks up the empty coffee thermos. Will kind of wants to kiss him goodbye, but now that they’re no longer touching, he’s feeling his confidence slip away. Hannibal must sense his hesitation, because he solves the problem for him by sliding a finger under Will’s chin and tilting it up, lips pressing to the corner of Will’s mouth. “Get some sleep.”

Will watches at the door as Hannibal’s car pulls out, and he stays there until the flash of the black paint disappears down the winding road. Then he stays there some more, watching the line of the dark woods and feeling the bite of the cold air on his bare skin.

The Ravenstag is amongst the trees. He can see the spike of its antlers, hear the harsh clip of its hooves.

Will turns and calmly goes back inside before it sees him too.

Chapter End Notes

as ever, im so very grateful for all the comments and support!

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow, Will manages to go back to sleep after Hannibal leaves.

He dreams off and on, although everytime he opens his eyes the memory of them slips from him like smoke tangling with fog. More than once he wakes to the ringing of his phone, but he barely stirs before turning over and going back to sleep.

It's far too soon for another body to have showed up. Whatever Jack wants can wait.

The sun is already beginning to sink by the time he crawls out of bed. It's been a long time since he's napped half a day away, but Will supposes if anything at all was going to knock his exhausted body down a few pegs, the emotionally crippling shock of his world creaking on unsteady struts would do it.

He's missed three calls from Jack. He hadn't left a voicemail, but there's a single message lighting up Will's screen.

Jack Crawford
You were right. Kidney taken with surgical precision.

It's probably improper to smile at such a text, but the vindictive satisfaction in his gut is overpowering.

i told you. it's the ripper.

Barely a minute passes before Jack responds. Will has a clear image of him cradling his phone, waiting desperately for Will to return his calls, eager for the prophet to speak.

Jack Crawford
Or somebody who wants us to think it's the ripper.

The feeling of satisfaction in Will's gut shrivels and dies. He punches out his reply.

it's the ripper.

He throws his phone to the bed to get lost among the sheets and heads for the bathroom. He's not soaked, which is nice, but his skin feels tacky and over-warm. He's probably put Hannibal through enough as it is without demanding his company when Will smells as if he's been languishing away in a sickbed for the better part of a week.

He showers quickly and even makes a half-hearted effort of washing his hair. He can't remember the last time he did, which is probably telling. By the time he stumbles back into the living room, he feels perhaps more human than he has all day, although the bar had hardly been high.

The dogs scramble out the door the second he opens it, and Will takes the reprieve to make himself a coffee without a dozen fury bodies trying to trip him up. It tastes like death when compared to what Hannibal had brought him this morning, and Will spikes it generously with his best whisky. It improves his mood if not the general taste.

His laptop is sitting haphazardly on the coffee table and he sweeps it up before heading out to the porch. The dogs are chasing one another around the frozen yard, but Will gives them half an hour at most before the snow urges them back to the house. He leaves the front door propped open and sinks into one of the beaten chairs, nursing his coffee in one hand and levering open his laptop with the other.

Hannibal had told him not to check TattleCrime, but Will thinks he's got enough sleep under his belt to stomach the worst Freddie Lounds can throw at him.

Looking at the front page of TattleCrime is like a blast from the past. There's no picture of the body, but there is a telling shot of Jack himself striding from the motel room, expression thunderous. Beneath that, Will sees his own face staring back at him, glasses crooked and face tight with tension.

It'd bother him more if it wasn't for the fact that he doesn't recognize the shirt he's wearing. Freddie clearly hadn't been quick enough to snap a decent photo of him this morning and instead has been forced to pull from her own archives.

Amused, he sips his coffee and ticks his gaze to the article.

Will Graham expands his body of work after two years of silence!

Despite himself, Will can't help but snort. He's never expected classy journalism from Freddie Lounds, but he'd mistakenly believed her above poor wordplay.

It's been two years since the copycat murders that shocked a nation. I think many of us can still remember exactly where we were the first time we heard the news that infamous horror writer Will Graham's fevered imaginings had been turned into a reality.

While most fans might be content sending in mail or flowers, Garrett Jacob Hobbs had instead skipped right past that into cold-blooded murder. Hobbs killed and grotesquely displayed eight young girls before the FBI and, indeed, Graham himself, managed to put him down like the animal he was.

Now it seems the animal is back. As of this morning, Will Graham has once again attracted himself another superfan willing to kill in his name.

The body of Lester Ionnoti was found displayed in a quaint roadside motel outside of Baltimore just shy of five AM, and sources have confirmed that the display comes straight from the pages of Graham's best-selling "Ravenstag series". I would not recommend Graham's writing for the faint of heart, but for those of you who are curious, my sources cite book three, "Meditations", as the inspiration behind this particular scene.

Is this another copycat angling the for title of serial killer? Or perhaps the weight of a mind heavy with blood and murder has finally tipped Graham over the thin line between humanity and the monster he writes about?

Will's amusement dries up like the last of the rain in a barren desert. There's more in the article, but Will has no interest in reading it. Gently, he closes the laptop and slightly less gently drops it to the porch beside his chair.

Buster comes over to sniff at it, curious. "Leave it," Will grumbles, gently prodding his furry side with his bare feet. "Come on, go play with the others."

Buster licks his ankle and clambers off the porch to join the rest of the pack. Will takes a hearty sip of his coffee, watching the lot of them, and feels some of the tight tension easing out of him at the sight of their dogishly delighted expressions.

He isn't sure what he'd expected to get out of the article, only that he couldn't stand to face the world tomorrow without having at least a vague idea of what he should be preparing for.

Will sighs, letting his head fall back and staring up at the cracked awning over his head.

You've been through all of this before, he thinks.

But he hasn't. Not like this. Hobbs had been bad enough, but the Ripper is something else entirely. Will still doesn't know how to feel about it. Mostly he's starting to think that not feeling anything at all might be the smarter choice.

He doesn't know how long he's out there, but eventually the sun touches down on the horizon, and the automatic light flickers on. The dogs stagger back up the porch and collapse in a puddle around his feet, snuggling together for warmth and yawning widely.

Will stays outside even as the winter chill bites at him and drains his mediocre coffee.

He hears the crunch of tires pulling off the road, and he looks up to see Hannibal's Bentley cutting through the gloom. Will considers getting up to greet him, but Winston is asleep on his toes, and Will doesn't have the heart to move him.

He stays where he is, cradling his lukewarm mug and watches as Hannibal climbs from the car. He's got the same insulated bag from this morning, and something about the almost surreal domesticity of the situation pulls a smile from him.

"Hey," he says, toasting Hannibal with his mug as he approaches the house. "I wasn't sure if you were still coming."

"I called," Hannibal offers, stepping over the mess of dogs.

Will shrugs. "Left my phone inside."

"Wise," Hannibal says. "How are you feeling?"

Will makes a see-sawing motion with his hand. "Undecided. The coffee helped."

The corners of Hannibal's dark eyes crinkle and his thin mouth curls. "A poor man's Irish coffee?"

Will gives his mug a considering look. "I'm not sure where my whisky came from, but I can promise you it wasn't Ireland. How did you know?"

"I can smell it," Hannibal says.

"I didn't think I made it that strong," Will says, a lot awkward and a little defensive.

"Perhaps not, but I have a keener sense of smell than most," Hannibal says, which raises more questions than it answers. "May I have use of your kitchen again?"

Will waves him to the house. "All yours. I'm probably not going to be much help, if I'm honest."

"I'm sure I can manage without an escort," Hannibal says. He bends down, and for a second Will thinks he's going to kiss him, but Hannibal merely plucks his empty mug from his slack fingers, and then the laptop from the ground, tucking it under his arm. "Shall I get you a refill?"

"Please," Will says, and then, because he can't think of a reason not to, he gently grabs Hannibal's coat and brings him back down for a kiss.

It's short and warm, and when Hannibal pulls back there's a slight softening in his expression. He reaches out, cupping Will's cheek and smoothing his thumb along the edge of his stubble. "Do you wish to eat out here?"

Will snorts. "Is whatever you've planned for dinner that portable?"

"It can be," Hannibal promises, and his warm hand falls away. "I'll be back momentarily."

Will watches him go, feeling remarkably grounded with Hannibal's touch lingering on his skin, and his dogs piled around him. He lays his head back again and loses himself in the currents of his stream.

He doesn't know how long he stays there, but eventually he feels something soft and warm brushing his skin and opens his eyes to realize Hannibal's settled a blanket over his shoulders.

"Really?" Will asks, amused, even as he reaches up to adjust it.

Hannibal smiles, pressing the back of his hand against Will's cheek. The warmth of his touch feels spectacular, and Will leans into it with a small noise before he can stop himself. "You're very cold to the touch, Will. How long have you been out here?"

Will shrugs, uncaring. "A while, I suppose. I needed the fresh air."

Hannibal looks mildly concerned but doesn't push. Will appreciates it deeply. He doesn't mind Hannibal's quiet comfort, but he's not in the mood to be mothered.

“Dinner,” Hannibal say, and Will realizes that Hannibal has set down two steaming bowls on the side table between the porch chairs, as well as a fresh mug of coffee.

“What are we eating?” Will asks as Hannibal gently maneuvers around the dogs to take the spare seat. The chair sags low enough that Hannibal has to artfully angle his legs to avoid looking like a fool, but he manages it like a natural. Will is perhaps a little jealous.

“Silkie chicken in broth,” he says, and Will watches disbelievingly as he unfolds a napkin from seemingly nowhere and settles it across his lap. He picks up his own bowl and catches Will’s expression, offering him an amused smile in return. “I thought with the stress and the cold weather, a boost to the immune system might not go astray.”

“I’m not sick,” Will points out, dipping his spoon into the broth.

“Which is why I did not make you the colloquial chicken soup,” Hannibal responds promptly, and Will gets the impression he might have vaguely managed to offend him with the oblique comparison.

It makes him smile, just a little, and he takes his first mouthful. It is, of course, excellent. Will lets out a deep sigh around the spoon. “Just once,” he says, “I’d like to see you fuck up a dish, just for my own pride.”

“Rest assured, I have made many culinary mistakes over the years,” Hannibal says. “That is the nature of experimentation, I’m afraid. I’ve just never been so foolish as to feed them to others.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Will allows. “Still, hard to imagine you burning toast or forgetting a roast in the oven.”

“There have been times,” Hannibal says. “Regardless, shall I assume you’re enjoying dinner?”

“It’s amazing,” Will confesses. One of the dogs snuffle in their sleep and Will casts them a fond glance. “I’m more surprised you were amenable to eating out here.”

“This is your house, Will. I’m happy to follow your lead.”

Will snorts. “You let me get away with too much,” he says. “You’re allowed to say no, you know.”

“I know,” Hannibal assures him. “And I will if I feel the need.”

Will chooses to let the conversation go. They eat in peace and quiet, the dogs dozing softly around them. Will feels alarmingly at peace, and by the time he finishes the last of the soup, the edgy bitterness of his earlier mood has largely faded.

“You seem calmer,” Hannibal remarks as he gets to his feet, taking Will’s bowl from his lax hands.

“I feel it,” Will admits, stretching. “Hard to be stressed when faced with a decent meal.”

Hannibal's eyes crinkle in a pleased smile. "Perhaps we should move inside now, before you do catch a cold. I'm sure that's the last thing you need right now."

Will rolls his eyes, but pries himself out of the chair and follows after Hannibal into the house, dropping the blanket from around his shoulders on a chair as they pass. The dogs barely stir at the sound of the door, and Will leaves it propped open for whenever they're ready to retreat to the warmth.

He finds Hannibal at the sink, already easing the dishes into the soapy water, and he slides into the place at his side as if it's second nature. They wash-up in companionable silence, and it seems impossible to think that they'd only done this for the first time two days ago.

There is an easiness to their developing relationship that Will is finding far surpasses their limited history. It's both a comforting and frightening thought, and Will files it away for later analysis, unwilling to lose his calm mood to the stress of over-thinking.

While Will packs the cleaned bowls away, Hannibal pulls a bottle of wine from the fridge that Will knows for a fact hadn't been in there the day before.

"You're not subtle," Will says, but obligingly pulls out a pair of glasses from the back of the shelf. One of them has a chip at the base, and Will self consciously claims it as his own as he sets them on the counter for Hannibal to fill.

"I am not attempting to be," Hannibal says, pouring smoothly. "I was hoping to pair it with dinner, but it didn't seem the time. I believe you will appreciate it at any rate."

Will does not say he tends to be appreciate any and all alcohol regardless of the price tag. He plucks up the glass and, feeling slightly ridiculous, swirls it gently and brings it up to inhale the aroma. He's sure there are a multitude of delicate scents but he can't understand any of them, but it's worth it for Hannibal's pleased smile.

They retire to the living room, and Will curls up on the couch while Hannibal wanders the room curiously, looking completely out of place in his fine suit as he stoops to inspect Will's fly-tying gear and dog-eared book.

Not the for the first time Will wonders what Hannibal intends to get out of this relationship in the long term when they couldn't be any less alike if they tried.

He watches as Hannibal reaches down with one hand and gently runs the pad of his thumb along the sharp barb of the fly barred beneath the magnifying glass. Will can see the bead of blood that wells up immediately, and Hannibal pulls back, considering it for a second with an indecipherable expression, before slipping his thumb into his mouth.

Will is almost alarmed by the instinctual flare of heat in his gut, and he tightens his grip around the stem of his glass in surprise. He can't tell if the arousal comes from the sight of Hannibal or his blood.

"Careful," he warns, clearing his throat. "Most things you'll find on that desk are sharp enough to draw blood."

Hannibal turns, thumb slipping from his mouth and smiling. “As it should be,” he says. “You’d make a poor hunter otherwise.”

“Fisherman,” Will corrects.

“That sounds like an important distinction to you.”

Will shrugs, self conscious. “I tried hunting once,” he says, drinking deeply. “Didn’t take.”

Hannibal prowls closer until he’s standing near enough that their knees almost knock. Will is forced to crane his head to keep the illusion of eye contact. There is something so inherently predatory and deliberate about Hannibal’s action that Will expects to feel caged in and on guard.

He doesn’t.

“But you continued to enjoy fishing,” Hannibal observes. “Surely the end result is much the same?”

“Careful, Doctor Lecter, you’re walking dangerously close to psychoanalysis now,” Will says dryly.

Hannibal smiles thinly and takes a half step back. Will feels strangely disappointed by the loss of contact. “Forgive me, I don’t intend to make you uncomfortable. You’re fascinating to talk with, Will, and I’m afraid I often get caught up in the potential of our discussions.”

“I wasn’t… I wasn’t saying I was uncomfortable,” Will says, a touch awkwardly. “Look, can you sit down? I’m getting a crick in my neck trying to look up at you. Try a subtler power play for a while.”

Hannibal does not deny the tacit accusation and makes no effort to hide his amusement. Obligingly, he sinks into the sofa beside Will, turned slightly so as to keep Will in his sightline.

“What was it about hunting that distressed you?”

Will grimaces. “You really can’t take a hint, can you?”

“You told me that I was not making you uncomfortable,” Hannibal says blithely. “I have confidence that if that changes, you’ll let me know.”

Will sighs, scratching a hand through his hair as he considers the empty space just above Hannibal’s shoulder. He chooses his words with the carefulness of somebody long familiar with their tendency to be turned into weapons.

“Hunting is… too proactive. It requires a different mindset; one I don’t particularly enjoy engaging in.”

It’s not a lie. In fact, it is more a truth than most things Will tends to share. But it’s so carefully parsed and filtered for delicate consumption that he knows the root of it is lost in

translation.

Hannibal arches a brow. “Your novels,” he says. “One could argue that you’ve written the most accurate and engaging description of a hunting mindset to date.”

“Sure,” Will says, more breezily than he really feels. “If you’re an avid reader of Freddie Lounds. I write fiction, Hannibal. The Ravenstag isn’t real and it isn’t me.”

Hannibal looks as if he has more to say, but they’re interrupted by the sharp scratch of claws on the floorboards, and Will looks up to see Winston loping forward, finally awake enough to realize that Will had left him behind.

“Hey, big guy,” Will says, sitting his wine on the coffee table and leaning forward just as Winston drops his fury head in his lap. Will ruffles his ears. “Finally got cold? I should probably go make sure the rest of the pack doesn’t think they’re sleeping out there tonight, huh?”

Winston gives him a baleful look and yawns widely. Will can’t help but give him a stupid smile, endeared by his sleepy trust.

He looks back up to catch Hannibal watching him with a curious expression. Embarrassment flashes through him and Will gets to his feet quickly, letting his glasses slide down to obscure a clear view of his face. “I’m just going to go round the dogs up,” he says. “Think you can handle keeping Winston company without supervision?”

“I’m sure we’ll manage,” Hannibal says. “It’ll give us a moment to get acquainted.”

Despite himself, Will laughs. “He likes chin scratches,” he says, and goes to fetch the others.

Will’s pack is disgruntled to be whistled back inside but they go without complaint, save Buster who Will has to fetch from the yard, brushing snow out of his thick coat before it winds up a puddle on the kitchen floor.

When he comes back into the living room, it’s to see Winston with his head on Hannibal’s knee, and Hannibal stroking his furry ears with no complaint whatsoever.

“He’s going to get fur all over your expensive suit,” Will warns, dropping Buster in the bed nearest the space heater.

“I’m beginning to suspect that might just be a general side effect of keeping your company,” Hannibal says, sounding surprisingly unbothered by the prospect.

Will tries not to be hopelessly charmed and fails miserably. “It’s getting late,” he says.

Hannibal glances out the window, as if he hadn’t been beside Will this whole time slowly watching the dusk turn to night. “I suppose it is. I should head back before the snow begins to fall again.”

“You could stay if you want,” Will blurts before he loses his confidence. “It’s a long drive back. I don’t mind.”

Hannibal looks up and manages to catch Will's gaze. "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

"I told you before that you don't have to be so careful about what I want all the time," Will says. "I'm not made of glass, Hannibal."

"I know," he says. "But I think it has perhaps been a long time since anybody has treated you as something worthy of care and consideration, and I find that I want to give that to you."

Will doesn't know what to say to that. Carefully, he steps around the dogs piled on the floor, and Hannibal reaches out to set his hands on Will's waist. Will takes that as permission to slide his hands into Hannibal's carefully styled hair, lean down, and kiss him.

When he pulls back he gives Hannibal a wry smile. "So are you staying the night or not?"

Hannibal's thumbs rub smoothing circles on his waist. "If you'd like me to," he says. "But maybe the couch, for tonight."

A part of Will wants to argue, but mostly he's too tired for it, and he has to admit that it's probably not unwise. So far Hannibal has been more accommodating of Will's endless issues than he probably deserves, but he thinks it might be a bit much too ask him to deal with Will's night sweats less than a week into their relationship.

"Alright," Will says, drawing away. "Next time you stay the night, let's maybe time it for a day I'm less emotionally exhausted."

"We can certainly try."

--

Will awakens with the deeply unsettling feeling that something is wrong.

It isn't a particularly unusual feeling for him, and as he blinks back into awareness he's less alarmed than he probably should be. Sluggishly, he tries to take stock of the situation.

He's cold. That's his first thought. His toes feel like ice, and when he blinks slowly down he realizes he can see snow-choked grass beneath them, rough under his bare feet.

Oh, Will thinks.

"Will?"

The door to the house hisses on its hinges, before slamming shut. Will turns, uncoordinated and sleep-confused, to see Hannibal carefully descending the porch steps to join him in the yard. He looks sleepy and delightfully ruffled, and Will can't help but stare dazedly at his messy hair.

"I…" Will can't remember what he was going to say. Exhausted, he scrubs a hand over his face and tries to orientate himself in the world. "I'm fine."

Hannibal trails carefully closer, and Will notices the spare blanket from the couch folded over the crook of his arm.

“May I touch you?”

Will nods, still running remarkably dry on words, and Hannibal steps closer, gently draping the blanket in his hands over Will’s shoulders. Will reaches up to catch it on instinct alone, strangely comforted by the soft plush beneath his fingertips. Hannibal’s hand comes up to rest on his shoulder, and the other at his waist, guiding him into Hannibal’s chest which still harbours the warmth of Will’s couch.

“Do you know where you are?”

Will does. He’s pretty sure he does. Still, it takes him a solid several seconds of struggling to find the words he needs. “I - yeah. I’m home. I’m safe.”

If Hannibal is in the least curious about that last bit, he doesn’t show it, simply bundling Will closer until his chin is resting atop Hannibal’s shoulder. “This doesn’t sound like your first time waking in your yard.”

That finally manages to startle a genuine laugh from Will. “Better than the roof,” he says, and then, before Hannibal can press, “I’m sorry I woke you.”

Hannibal pulls back, adjusting the blanket methodically, frowning when he feels the ice of Will’s skin. “No apology necessary,” he says. “I’m glad to have woken. It is perhaps not the time of the year for a midnight stroll, I’m afraid.”

Will gives him a weak smile. “Probably,” he agrees.

Outside with only the moon to light him, Hannibal cuts a very devastating figure, almost larger than life. The rest of the world seems strangely blurry in comparison, and Will can’t help but cling closer to the illusion of stability he provides.

“Come back inside, Will,” Hannibal says.

“Okay,” Will agrees, and allows himself to be gently guided back to the house, Hannibal’s hand on the small of his back heavy and comforting all the while.

Hannibal deposits him on the bed, leaving him there as he goes about locking the door and quieting the dogs who have begun to stir anxiously now that they’re aware of all the commotion. Will watches as he stoops down to gently stroke along Winston’s back, and he can’t help the dizzying surge of fondness that hits him.

He’s still hazy, like he always in the wake of one of his midnight excursions, but this time he doesn’t feel so anxious, soothed away from the rough confusion by Hannibal’s unquestioning presence and comfortable assertions.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Hannibal asks, very deliberately not looking up from the dogs.

Will clears his throat. “No. No, thank you.”

“Do you think you will be able to sleep again?”

Normally, probably not. But tonight he’s feeling daringly optimistic. It’s never so much a question of whether he’s tired or not in the wake of an episode like this, and more so the very real fear of returning to the same dream that walked him out the door.

Tonight, Will doesn’t want to worry about that. Tonight, Will thinks his bed might be kind.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m… I think I can manage it.”

Hannibal looks up, sharp mouth quirking into a small smile. “Good,” he says, sounding genuinely pleased.

Will casts a glance towards the couch and then back up at Hannibal. He’s still a little high off the sleepy contact, and he can’t stop himself from asking, “You could join me. If you want. I mean - just to sleep.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer for a second, and Will tries to meet his stare but can’t quite hold it. He breaks away, looking down at the battered floorboards, shoulders tensing.

“I would not wish to crowd you,” Hannibal says.

Will debates the merits of honesty for a moment before admitting, “It helps. Having somebody else here.”

Hannibal does not ask him if he’s sure, for which Will is incredibly glad for. A part of him thrills in the almost careful way Hannibal treats him - unused to being considered something worthy of care and caution - but he has never enjoyed being treated as if he does not know his own mind.

Hannibal parts from the dogs and Will shuffles over, making room for him. He’s suddenly aware of the saggy centre in his mattress, the overly-laundered sheets that have survived a hundred-odd runs through the washing machine.

If Hannibal notices any of those things too, he gives no indication. He climbs in beside Will without a pause, and Will is momentarily awed by Hannibal’s casual confidence in all things.

They settle down together, and it’s surprisingly unawkward. Hannibal’s hand briefly brushes his hip and Will shivers.

“Go to sleep, Will,” Hannibal says.

Even if Will wanted to, he doesn’t think he’d be able to resist the heavy, warm burr of Hannibal’s voice.

Feeling safe, he sleeps.

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When Will wakes, it's to an empty bed and a note on the kitchen counter in a beautiful, flowing script.

I had to leave to make my morning appointment. I did not wish to wake you. There is breakfast in the fridge.

It's not signed. Not that Will would have needed it to be, but there's something a little presumptuous in that absence, he thinks. He gets the feeling Hannibal does not ever have to worry about being forgotten. The impact he makes simply does not allow it.

While Will knows Hannibal's intentions had been nothing but good, he can't help but feel a little put off as he opens the fridge. Somehow, Hannibal had salvaged enough ingredients out of Will's barren kitchen to make a couple of very impressive looking breakfast quiches. Will eats them standing over the sink, feeling strangely guilty for it all the while.

It's still early, barely past seven, but Will can't help but think of the shop. He thinks he'd be justified in keeping it closed for another few days, but finds he doesn't want to. The idea of staying cramped in Wolf Trap with nothing but the fervour of his own thoughts to keep himself company is distinctly unappealing.

He dresses in a hurry, leaving the dirty dish in the sink, and begins the long drive into Baltimore with a restless kind of energy, trying to outrun the black mood that's attempting to sink its claws into him.

It doesn't work, because the first thing he sees when he pulls up to the shop is a collection of exhausted reporters lingering on the pavement out front.

He'd suspected as much, but he'd foolishly hoped that he'd have more time before they ambushed him. He supposes he should be grateful they hadn't come for him at home. The benefit of seven dogs and a reputation of training them to attack reporters on sight.

The reporters perk up as he approaches, fumbling with pens and paper and cameras. "Mr. Graham?"

"Move," Will grunts, shouldering past them to unlock the door.

"Mr. Graham," says the nearest reporter, more urgently. "Do you -"

"No comment," Will says. "I can't do anything if you plan to camp out here, but the second any of you set foot in the store, I'm calling the police."

He shoulders his way inside, making sure to definitively slam the door behind him, but is pulled up short at the threshold by the sight of Abigail at the front desk, sorting industrially through a crate of books.

She glances up, catches sight of him, and offers him a weary smile. "I see you made it past the vultures out there."

"What are you doing here so early?"

Abigail shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ear and focusing intently on the front page of the book in her hand. “Couldn’t sleep. What about you?”

Will mirrors her awkward smile. “About the same.”

Abigail laughs quietly, scribbling down a price. “We make quite the pair, don’t we?”

Will crosses the store and gently takes the book from her hands. “Go home, Abigail,” he says. “With the reporters out front, I don’t think we’re in for a busy day. I can handle it.”

“I’m fine,” she protests, shaking her head. “Honestly, I’d rather be here than at home worrying about you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Abigail calmly plucks another book from the box, flips it open, and scribbles inside. “That’s nice,” she says, “but this isn’t about you, so your opinion doesn’t count.”

Will can’t help but quirk a smile. “Not about me, huh?”

Abigail looks up, expression firm but not harsh. It was a trick she’d picked up from Alana, and looking at her now Will can’t help but be fondly amused by the ever growing similarities between them.

Since Will had chosen to end Alana’s tenancy as his psychiatrist, things had been ever so slightly awkward between them. More due to feelings of anxiety and guilt on Will’s behalf than any lack of professionalism on Alana’s.

Still, Will could hardly begrudge Alana’s success with Abigail.

“Alright,” Will allows, unwilling to fight over this in earnest. “Just remember, if a single reporter so much as sets a foot through that door, you call the cops, alright?”

“Even Freddie Lounds?”

Will snorts unkindly. “Especially Freddie Lounds.”

“I’m pretty sure Freddie Lounds can outrun the police anyday,” Abigail says wryly.

“Just call, okay?”

Last time, Will had made the mistake of trying to manage Freddie on his own, which has backfired spectacularly when she’d started showing up at his front door and rifling through his shed. Somehow, she’d always managed to be gone before Will could catch her in the act, and without proof, there had been nothing to back up Will’s claims of harassment. It’d put a damper on a chance of a restraining order.

Will doesn’t plan to make that mistake again. Not with Abigail - and, possibly, *hopefully,* Hannibal - in the picture. Putting his own privacy at risk is one thing, he won’t drag them into it too.

“Alright,” Abigail says. “I promise. You can go do whatever it is you want to do out back now. I can open up and mind the shop.”

Will hesitates, feeling conflicted about leaving Abigail to deal with the media circus outside alone.

“Go,” Abigail says, exasperated, pushing lightly at his arm. “I can handle it. Compared to - to last time, this should be simple.”

Will goes, because his parental reluctance does not weigh heavier than his desire to be in some place with a locking door and thick walls, free of company.

He spares Abigail a brief touch to the shoulder and beelines to the back where his office awaits, patient and looming. It is a bigger relief than Will can hope to explain, finally being on his own. That is not to say that Hannibal’s company had been anything but incredibly welcome, but in his heart Will has always been an introvert bordering on a hermit. Given the rough couple of days he’s had, he thinks he’s entitled to just a moment to breathe, to recharge his rapidly withering strength.

He manages just a moment and not a second longer.

Not even a full hour after he’d sunk into the desk chair there’s a knock at the door, far too loud to be Abigail, and Will glances up from the computer, vaguely dazed, just as it opens.

“Will,” Beverly says, peeking inside and smiling at him broadly. There are dark bags under her eyes that imply she’s probably running on far less sleep than her attitude hints at. “If it isn’t my favorite author recluse in his natural habitat.”

“Bev,” Will says, a little dumbly. “What are you doing here?”

She laughs and slips into the office, closing the door behind herself. “I can’t spare the time to make a social call to one of my dearest friends?”

“You can,” Will allows. “But this doesn’t feel like much of a social call.”

Beverly’s smile turns rueful, and she comes closer, perching on the edge of the desk, hands knotted in her lap. “Yeah,” she says. “I was planning on coming over today anyway, I swear, but Jack caught me on the way out the door and it doesn’t take the head of the FBI’s behavioural unit to solve that mystery.”

There it is. Will allows himself a small, slightly pained smile. “So you’re here on official business after all.”

“I don’t see why it can’t be both,” she says. “I’ve missed your dumb face, Graham.”

Will had missed her dumb face too, but he doesn’t permit himself to admit as much. It feels too much, too unwelcome, and Will is still depressingly unfamiliar with interpreting the invisible lines of his relationships. Better to err on the side of cautious, he always finds.

Sighing, he puts the computer to sleep and pushes his chair back. “If we’re going to talk about it, let’s not do it here, alright? Abigail’s in the store and I don’t want to drag her into this.”

“Kind of feels like Abigail’s already involved, Will.”

“Not this time she’s not,” Will says, sharper than Beverly probably deserves.

Beverly holds up her hands defensively. “Alright, I promise I wasn’t trying to imply anything. You want to keep Abigail at a distance this go round, I can hardly fault you for that. Lunch?”

“What?” Will asks, momentarily thrown by the abrupt shift in conversation.

“Lunch,” Beverly repeats patiently. “It’s even past noon so we could probably sneak in a drink or two and justify it if you want.”

That sounds more appealing than Will thinks he ought to admit, and he gets to his feet with a groan, stretching out sore and cramped muscles.

He hadn’t even been sitting for that long, but his whole body aches, and he can’t tell if it’s the end result of more tension than his poor body was designed to carry, or the after affects of his late night romp in the yard.

He’s always been more prone to carrying his stress in all the tight knots in his spine than most people, and the more tension in his daily life the more tension beneath his skin.

He’d gone for a professional massage exactly once. To nobody’s surprise, it turned out that Will deeply did not enjoy having strangers intimately touch his body. The supreme discomfort of the experience had canceled any potential benefit.

Besides, it reminded him a little too much of the weeks after his stabbing when he’d been forced into physical therapy, and that was a time in his life Will avoided revisiting at any and all costs.

He’d never gone again, and instead he just continues to exist in a perpetual state of discomfort.

Honestly, he supposes it’s something of a metaphor for his goddamn life at this point.

“Alright,” he says, rubbing at his tight shoulder. “Let’s go discuss dead bodies over lunch, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the wait for the chapter. i'm struggling with writer's block and motivation issues at the moment, in conjunction with just being generally busy irl. i'm hopeful that i should be able to work through it and be back to quicker posting soon, but in the meantime, thank you all for your patience and i hope this chapter was worth the wait.

tumblr: glenflower
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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They go to the same place they usually do, the diner three blocks away that does decent burgers and better drinks. Will doesn't think he's ever been here with somebody who isn't Beverly before, actually, which probably says a lot about his social prospects.

The lone waitress greets them with a smile that reads exhausted and leads them to a freshly vacated corner booth. The tabletop is still sticky but Will keeps his mouth shut, offering a polite grimace masquerading as a smile as he sinks into his seat.

"I'll have a house burger and a vodka sunrise, please," Beverly says cheerfully before the waitress can even offer them menus. "Will?"

"The same, but just water, thanks," he says. Then, when the waitress has vanished, "I thought you were kidding about drinks. It's barely noon, Bev."

She sighs, slumping down in the booth. "And I've spent all morning looking for tiny fibers on a dead body, so cut me some slack, Graham."

The waitress drops their drinks off, and Beverly immediately plucks the accompanying umbrella out of her glass, leaving it to drip by the serviette dispenser. Will gives her a moment to enjoy her drink before asking, "Did you find anything?"

"I think you know I didn't," Beverly says, setting her glass down again. "Jack's on a warpath over it. There's only one killer we've dealt with this good at erasing trace evidence, and he doesn't want to admit you're right."

Will's shoulders creep up beneath his ears. "Sorry."

Beverly swirls her straw, bleeding the blood red of the grenadine through the vodka. "You know this isn't your fault, right? I don't have to give you a lecture on self respect again, do I?"

Will tears his eyes from her cocktail and offers her a wan smile. "When people keep staging murders to match the books I write, it feels like it sort of might be."

Somebody clears their throat and Will glances up to see their waitress standing beside their table with their plates. "I've got two house burgers?" she says, sounding about as confident as she looks.

Will glances down to the sticky countertop, feeling a blush crawl along the back of his neck as he hurries to clear space. He doesn't look up again until she's set their meals down and vanished back in the direction of the kitchen. This is why he never leaves his goddamn house.

Across from him, Beverly picks up a fry from the edge of her plate, jabbing it at him as she says, “You can’t be held accountable for how some sicko interprets your work. That’s what we can victim blaming.”

Will snorts. “I don’t think there’s very many people out there who’d agree that I’m the victim here,” he says dryly.

The look Beverly gives him could strip paint from the walls. “I’ve very rarely met a person who’s been more victimized than you, Will Graham.”

Another person might be comforted by that, Will supposes. Instead, he just feels like a fraud. He’s never worn the shroud of grieving victimhood well. Desperate for a change of subject, he says, “What message did Jack want you to pass along?”

“He wants you to come in and have a look at the body,” she says, having the grace to sound apologetic about it. “See if you can pick anything up post-autopsy.”

Will takes a bite of his burger. It’s about as good as he remembers, the meat cooked just shy of rare, splitting decadently between his teeth. Compared to everything Hannibal has brought him over the past few days, it tastes like shit. He takes his time swallowing before he replies. “What does he think I’m going to notice post-autopsy that I couldn’t notice at the scene?”

Beverly shrugs, nose wrinkling. “I think he’s grasping at straws,” she confides. “He doesn’t want this to wind up the same as last time.”

Will can’t help but snort. “Does he think he’s the only one?”

“He knows he’s not,” Beverly says. When Will doesn’t reply immediately, she lowers her voice and adds, “He does care about you, Will. He’s just not the best at showing it.”

Will knows that. Jack pushes, but it’s only ever as far as he thinks Will can take. The fact that he’s a bad judge of Will’s boundaries is a better reflection of Will’s ever shifting stability more than Jack’s lack of care.

Will averts his eyes back to his plate. His burger has leaked a puddle of juice around the rim of it, turning his fries to mush. Will says, “Did he say anything about whether I’m still a suspect?”

“Your alibi checked out,” Beverly says. “Which is another thing entirely. Since when do you have anybody but me or Abigail to alibi you, Will Graham? Who the fuck is Hannibal Lecter?”

Shit. Maybe he hadn’t thought through this change of subject after all. Will tries for a shrug that he suspects looks as awkward as it feels. “Just a friend.”

Beverly’s mouth curls into a pleased smile. “A friend, huh?” she teases. “Damn, it took eight dead bodies and at least six months before you’d call *me* a friend. This Hannibal guy must be pretty persuasive.”

It'd probably be smart to brush Beverly off, but Will isn't feeling smart right now. He's staring at his desiccated burger, thinking of Hannibal bringing him breakfast, dinner. Spending the night with Will in his mess of a house in his mess of his bed. His broad palm resting between Will's shoulders as he guided him back into the house this morning.

He swallows. "Maybe more than a friend."

Beverly's smile morphs into sheer delight. "More than a friend? More than -?" She leans across the table to whack Will companionably on the shoulder. "Will! Look at you go, Casanova. A doctor, too! Tell me *everything."*

Will can't help but laugh. The tension that had been winding taut in his gut while they discussed murder and misery loosens so quick that he's almost dizzy with it. "There's not much to tell," he says. "It's still new."

"How did you meet?" Beverly presses. "When did you meet? Who asked who out?"

Feeling stupidly juvenile, Will says, "A few days ago, at the store. He asked me to dinner and I said yes."

"You said *yes,"* Beverly repeats with evident relish. "God, I never thought I'd live to see the day. You're going to introduce us, right?"

Will hasn't thought that far ahead. He's never dated anybody for long enough that it's ever become relevant. The idea that it might be relevant now makes him feel both woozy and giddy. "Maybe," he says. "Not yet. Like I said, it's still new."

"Does Abigail know?" Beverly asks.

"Uh," Will says.

"So that's a no," Beverly laughs. "Not that I'm not thrilled you told me first, but if she finds out you've been keeping this from her, she's going to be furious. Like father like daughter, you know?"

Will's stomach drops to his feet. Beverly looks up from her drink and catches his expression. The playful delight morphs into instant mortification. "Oh my god. Will, I didn't - I meant *you.* I wasn't thinking, I'm so sorry."

Two years. Will really should be over this sort of reaction by now. "It's fine."

Beverly leans forward, uncaring of the fact she nearly upsets her plate as she grabs Will's hand. "Abigail is *your* daughter, Will. You saved her, you raised her, and she adores you. And if I sometimes put my stupid foot in my mouth while trying to compliment you both, it's only because you're so good with her that I sometimes forget anybody could ever think she ever belonged with somebody else."

Will's not usually so easy to calm down, but something about Beverly's genuine urgency, the comforting press of her palm on the back of his, does the trick. He breathes out, dredging up a smile from somewhere deep inside. "It's alright, Bev. I know what you meant."

Beverly's brows draw together like she's not so sure, but she retreats back to her seat with a sigh. "I didn't used to be so bad at compliments," she says. "My parents raised me better, I promise."

"Mine didn't," Will says. "I think maybe I'm rubbing off on you."

That jerks a startled laugh out of Beverly at least. "You don't see me enough for that," she teases, but instantly sobers up when she adds, "Although I guess that's about to change."

Will looks back to his plate. Whatever remains of his appetite is long gone. "Tell Jack I'll look at the body," he says. "I'm not sure what he expects to get out of it, but I'll try."

A pause. "Will -"

"It's fine," Will says. "You think I haven't seen worse things than a dead man on a morgue slab? I'll be okay."

Beverly doesn't look convinced. "You're a writer, not an agent. He shouldn't be involving you in this at all."

Will looks up at her from underneath his glasses frames.

"Any more than you're already involved," Beverly clarifies.

"I was a cop," Will reminds her. "It's not like this is my only hands-on experience with death."

"Yeah, *was.* That was a while ago, Will, and you left for a reason."

Will pushes aside his plate and flags down the waitress across the dinner. "My reasons for leaving don't matter when bodies are dropping and I can help."

Beverly sighs. "Bodies, huh? You think there's going to be another one."

Will passes the waitress his card and turns back to Beverly with a wry look. "Don't you?"

Beverly doesn't answer until they're leaving the restaurant, Will pausing on the sidewalk to shrug back into his coat and wiggle on his gloves. "I think," she says cautiously, "that whatever happens next, you need to be careful."

Will glances up at her, frowning. "I'm always careful."

"Not careful enough," Beverly says darkly.

--

Will doesn't return to work after lunch. He calls Abigail, leaving stern instructions to lock up and leave before it gets dark, and heads back to Wolf Trap. He's done being social for now, and he misses his dogs. Going by the way they mob him at the door, the feeling is mutual.

He takes them out back for a while, throwing sticks idly as they roam about the fields. By the time he gets them back inside, they've burnt off enough energy that they crowd about the living room, flopping atop their beds or on one another's backs, following him with adoring eyes as he putters about the kitchen, making himself a cup of coffee he probably shouldn't be drinking this late in the afternoon.

He takes it back out to the living room, hurdling into the sofa as he drinks it far too quickly, surveying his pack with quite contentment. It's a good evening, honestly. A week ago, this would be the peak of happiness for him. Right now, it's close. So, so close. But not quite there.

Will stares down at the dregs of his coffee, debating with himself for a moment, before he sighs and sets aside his mug. He pulls his phone free and dials before he can second guess himself.

"Will," Hannibal greets, voice warm. *"I wasn't expecting to hear from you."*

"Yeah," Will says, scuffing a hand through his scruff. "I didn't - sorry, you're probably at work, aren't you? I didn't think this through."

"As luck would have it, I have finished with work for today," Hannibal says. *"You've caught me preparing dinner, that is all, a task that can easily be waylaid."*

The corner of Will's mouth tugs up. "Would you like to be waylaid?"

"For a chance at conversation with you, dear Will? Always."

It's far too soon for words like 'always', but Will likes the sound of it all the same. He can feel himself flush, and he's abruptly grateful he's alone. Christ, he's on the wrong side of thirty for reactions like that, but Hannibal pulls them out of him with such goddamn *ease.* "Tell me what you're cooking."

"For the moment, I'm merely marinating some pig heart. It shall sit overnight to strengthen the flavor, and come tomorrow I plan to sear it and serve it with an accompaniment of seasonal vegetables."

"Heart?" Will repeats, taken aback. "Do you eat a lot of heart?"

Hannibal laughs quietly. *"I believe you will find that I enjoy an eclectic range of delights,"* he says. *"Most anything can be cooked and turned to a delicacy with the right skill level."*

"You eat a lot of offal too then, I take it?" Will asks, brow raising.

"Not just offal," Hannibal assures him, sounding amused by Will's dubiousness. *"There is little that life provides that can't be transformed. Kidney's make excellent savory pie filling, and liver is a prime source of iron in most dishes it's included in. Bones provide rich stock, and of course the marrow itself is sublime."*

Unable to help himself, Will shivers. The one time his father had taken him hunting, they'd managed to take down a buck, a beautiful beast of a thing who'd stared up at Will with black

eyes as it bled out in the bramble and bushes. His father had shown him how to butcher it, Will's hand steady as he carved thick venison steaks from the bone. After, they'd cooked the freshest of the cuts atop the campfire, its bones crackling and blackening amidst the coals.

"You gotta be careful with the marrow," his dad had warned him, snapping a tibia in half and passing it to Will. *"Can make you real sick if you don't cook it right, but hell is it worth it."*

They'd sucked the marrow right from the bone, sharp splinters cutting at Will's lip. Twenty years later, he can taste it still; soft like jelly, gamey and rich. On the other side of the campfire, the buck's severed head lay in a shallow grave, not yet buried, staring through the dancing flames with dead eyes as Will consumed it, bones and all.

"Will?"

Will's abruptly jerked back to reality, and he passes a hand over his face, swallowing back the memory. "I'm here."

"Now you are, perhaps. Will you tell me where you went?"

Will can't think of anything he wants less. Instead, he says, "I've never had heart before. How does it taste?"

There's a clink from Hannibal's end of the phone, and Will imagines him in his kitchen, all earth tones and steel, broad shoulders flexing as he sets a chunk of viciously bloody meat in a shallow dish. *"It depends greatly on the health of the animal before its death, but it's a robust flavor. That you've yet to try it is a disappointment we should remedy, I believe. How would you feel about joining me tomorrow?"*

A heavy head plops down on his knee, and Will glances down to see Jesper staring up at him balefully. Will scratches behind his ear, feeling about as lovelorn as Jesper looks, and says, "Careful doctor, you keep spending as much time with me as you have been, you'll grow tired of me quickly."

"Will," Hannibal says, *"I could spend every moment of the day with you and never grow tired of it."*

Will's traitorous heart trips in his chest. *Too soon,* he reminds himself. *Far too soon.*

It doesn't seem to matter. The magnetic pull between them has locked Will so tightly into Hannibal's orbit that he couldn't fight it even if he wanted to, and he's never wanted anything less.

Rather than confess to any of that, Will blurts, "I told a friend about you today."

There's a pregnant pause. *"Is that alright?"*

Will blinks. "Shouldn't I be the one asking you that?"

"My boundaries are less distinct than yours," Hannibal says.

“Do you have any at all?”

“Don’t most people?” Hannibal asks, amused.

Will doesn’t allow himself to be dissuaded. “I’m not asking most people, I’m asking you.”

Another pause, this one shorter but just as poignant, and then Hannibal allows, *“My boundaries are more elastic than most.”*

Will thinks of Hannibal’s easy confidence, the assuredness with which he maneuvers his way through the world. The presumptive control he exudes in every room he’s in. In another person, Will might read that as an easy delineation of the borders between the various aspects of their life.

Not so in Hannibal. Will thinks a lot of things blur together for Hannibal.

Will swallows. “I’ll come to dinner, but I have to warn you I might not be great company. Jack wants me to come in and look at the body tomorrow.”

“Jack Crawford? What does he expect you to tell them that you have not already elected to share?”

A laugh slips free of Will, startling Jesper who finally retreats from Will’s space with a betrayed look. “Yeah, I said the same thing.”

“Regardless, my desire to see you is never contingent upon your mood,” Hannibal says.

Despite himself, a smile slips free of Will’s control. “You really want me there, huh?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replies immediately. *“Come to dinner with me, Will.”*

Will breathes out. Lets his eyes drift closed. “Should I feed my dogs before I come over?”

“That is a decision for you to make.”

“But I’m asking you.”

“In that case, it would please me enormously if you did.”

Christ. Who says things like that? “Yeah, it’d please me enormously, too,” Will says.

Hannibal says, *“I shall see you tomorrow, Will.”*

“Tomorrow,” Will agrees, and then before he can follow that up with anything dumb, he hangs up the call. When he glances up, his dogs are ranged about, watching him with silent, judgmental faces.

He pulls a face right back. “What are you looking at?” he asks.

Buster barks. It sounds as judgmental as he looks.

“Yeah,” Will sighs. “Believe me, I know.”

--

The next morning, Will’s day starts off well. He sleeps decently, and the traffic on the way into Baltimore is minimal at best. By the time he’s pulling up to the store, he’s in a good mood, thinking cheerfully about dinner that evening. About what might come *after* dinner that evening.

He shoulders his way in through the rarely used back door to avoid the few lingering reporters out front, unwinding his scarf from his neck as he calls out, “Abigail?”

“In here!” Abigail calls back from the store proper.

Will follows her voice to find her at the register, scrolling through an unfortunately familiar site on the store’s PC. She doesn’t even look up at him, too busy frowning at the red and white screen. Will heaves a sigh. “Stop giving Freddie Lounds ad revenue.”

Abigail’s gaze finally lands on him. Her blue eyes are wide and serious, lips chapped from biting at them. “Will -”

Will’s phone rings. “Give me a second,” he tells her as he drags it from his pocket. Jack’s name flashes on the screen. He rolls his eyes as he answers it. “I told Beverly I’d be in after lunch sometime. The body isn’t -”

“There’s a new one,” Jack interrupts.

Will’s stomach drops to his feet. He looks over at Abigail. For the first time, he looks at the screen open before her properly.

TattleCrime is as ugly as ever, all garish red against glaring white, but the headline sprawled across the homepage is unfamiliar. ***Another one bites the dust!*** reads Freddie’s cheerful caption. It’s dated less than an hour ago. ***Inside the carnage of Will Graham’s madness!***

Will squeezes his eyes shut. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Jack says grimly. “Where are you right now?”

“At the store,” Will says. “Jack, I -”

“Stay there,” Jack orders. *“I’m sending a car to pick you up. We need you here.”*

Will doesn’t even have it in him to pretend to argue at that. “Sure. Send a car for Abigail, too. I don’t want her alone in the store when the rest of the press gets wind of this.”

Jack hangs up without another word, and Will slides his phone back into his pocket, turning back to Abigail she meets his weary expression with an equally weary smile. “You think we’ll ever get a chance to keep the store open for a full day again?” she asks.

“Abigail,” Will says. “Maybe you should stay with Marissa until this whole thing is…” He hesitates. ‘Over’ feels like the wrong word. ‘Over’ indicates a coming end, a final conclusion. With the Ripper taking an interest in Will, ‘over’ feels like a dangerous thing to wish for.

Abigail doesn’t pick up on his pause. Instead, she says, “Maybe I should stay with *you.* You shouldn’t be alone either.”

“God, spending more time with me is the last thing you should be doing in this situation,” Will says, sagging against the counter. “I don’t want you anywhere near this, Abigail.”

“And I don’t want *you* anywhere near this,” she snaps, hands firmly on her hips. “What if this new killer is even more dangerous than my dad?”

Fuck. Well he can’t tell her about the Ripper *now,* can he? He’d been meaning to, but things had gotten in the way, but looking into her determined gaze he knows if he shares his suspicions now, she’ll be utterly unstoppable in her quest to keep him safe. As Beverly had said, like father like daughter.

Instead of that, Will gives away a different sort of secret. “Look,” he says, “I won’t be alone, at least tonight. I’ve been… seeing someone.”

Abigail blinks, taken aback. “You’ve been *what?”*

“Do you remember Hannibal? The doctor who helped Marissa?”

Abigail’s mouth drops. All her righteous indignation blown free of her sails. “For how long?” she demands.

Will clears his throat. “It’s new,” he says, as awkward as he had been with Beverly.

“It’d have to be,” Abigail says, not at all as distracted as Beverly had been, “considering you only met him a week ago. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!”

“I’m telling you now,” Will says. There’s the crunch of tires outside the store and Will glances up to see a cop car idling at the curb. “Look, just stay with Marissa for a few days, okay? I promise I’ll do my best not to be alone too, just for a bit.”

Abigail’s eyes narrow. Like this, with her eyes so blue and her expression so stern, she reminds Will of himself. More than once, they’d been mistaken for flesh and blood. He supposes, in a way they are. A more permanent sort of blood than most.

The door to the store jingles as a cop pokes his head in, eyeing the two of them. “Mr. Graham? Jack Crawford sent me to escort you.”

“In a minute,” Will says, and turns back to Abigail. He reaches out, setting a hand to her shoulder and squeezing. “Abigail, *please.”*

She heaves a sigh. “Alright,” she relents. “But we *are* talking about this.”

“I never dreamed otherwise,” Will lies.

Abigail rolls her eyes at him, shoving him to the door. “Go,” she says. “I’ll lock up while I wait for my own honor guard. Don’t let Jack push you around too much, okay?”

“Okay,” Will agrees.

The look Abigail shoots him says she doesn’t believe him one bit.

That’s fair. Will hadn’t believed himself either.

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Today’s crime scene is nothing at all like the last. Instead of a roadside motel, Will is taken to a McMansion in Towson, near Ruxton. It looms over a sprightly green lawn, lavish stone wet with winter morning dew. The curving driveway is thick with cop cars and practical FBI compacts. Crime scene tape cuts it off from the street, but it’s not enough to stop neighbors from standing in their own expansive driveways, gawking.

Will spots Jack standing on the veranda, expression appropriately grim, arms folded tightly. Will takes a moment to prepare himself before hauling himself out of the car to join the circus around him, leaving his escort behind.

Jack sees him approaching immediately, as attuned to Will as always. “I hope you didn’t have much for breakfast,” he says. “We’ve had two pukers already and I’m not angling for a third.”

Will looks at him wryly. “I was the one who designed the murder,” he says. “It’s not exactly going to be the first time I’ve seen it, really.”

Jack gives him a piercing look. “Is that so?”

“First time in person,” Will says. “As you *know.”*

Jack grimaces, turning away. “Let’s get this over with.”

Will follows him inside. Fancy cherry floorboards squeak beneath his muddy boots, and the chandelier overhead sprinkles crystal ghosts across the wall as it sways. Will barely gets a moment to appreciate the disgusting grandiosity of it all before his attention is forcibly ripped away, and with it his breath.

There’s a grand staircase that leads up to a landing that runs the whole length of the foyer. Tied to the railing is a woman, perfectly centered, held aloft by nothing but her own hands threaded through the gaps in the balustrade, sharp fishing line linking one wrist to the other with just enough give to keep the arms spread. Her arms face out, bearing thick stitches that run from her inner elbow to her wrist.

Probably that’s not what made two different people puke. Probably it’s the fact her entire lower jaw is gone.

“Jesus,” Will breathes. He’s unable to tear his eyes from the tongue. With nothing to support it, it hangs down the front of the woman’s throat. It reminds Will of his dogs, honestly. “Surprised you only had two pukers, Jack. Nobody likes a homemade mandibulectomy.”

“Not much blood for a homemade mandibulectomy,” Jack says.

“Not any blood at all,” Will counters. The woman hangs above them, as pristine as if she’d just woken from a hospital procedure. The lack of blood could indicate post-mortem infliction. It’s not though. With the Ripper, it never is. This poor woman was alive when he took her jaw from her, and after, once she’d bled out, he’d cleaned her up with perfunctory care. “You know what surgical precision indicates, right?”

Jack sighs, turning away from the sagging body. He plucks his hat from his hand, rubbing a weary hand over his face. “Yeah, I know.”

Will barely looks at him, too busy staring at the body. It doesn’t stare back. The woman’s eyes are aimed at the floor, subservient in death in a way she hadn’t been in a life. Deferring to her betters. Like she should.

With effort, Will rips his gaze away just in time to see Beverly and the others arrive. She opens her mouth to greet him, but Will cuts her off. “I need somebody to open her arms.”

Zeller blinks at him. “Is this going to be like the missing kidney all over again?”

“Wait,” Price interrupts, holding up a hand as he frowns up at the body. “No, I think I’ve read this one, actually. The killer takes her bones, doesn’t he?” He looks to Will for confirmation. “Radius and ulna, both. Leaves her arms empty, like loose sleeves.”

Zeller pales abruptly. “Jesus, Graham. You *wrote* that?”

Will ignores them both. To Beverly, he says, “Please. I need to see.”

Beverly glances at Jack. He shrugs. “Techs have already been through. Let’s cut the body down and do it.”

Will watches as the body is carefully lowered from the landing. It’s almost comical, really. She sways and jerks like a puppet on cut strings until she’s guided down to the gurney, and there, finally, she lays still. Her glassy eyes stare up at the ceiling, tongue flopped to the side of her mouth. Will hears one of the crime scene techs swallow thickly, excusing themselves abruptly from the room. A moment later, the sound of somebody being sick echoes from outside.

“And there’s lucky number three,” Will mutters.

Jack ignores him. “Cut her open.”

Zeller gets the honor this time, gingerly holding the dead woman’s wrist as he slips the scalpel beneath the thick yarn stitches. They unravel with ease, and her skin splits open beneath them, eager to spill its secrets. The whole room is silent as Zeller sets the scalpel down and presses open her flesh for the room to see.

There's veins, tendons, muscles. Old blood beads across it all, dried in place where it'd previously been aerated. The arm sags in Zeller's grip like a ragdoll. Of course it does. There's no bones to hold it steady.

"Will," Price announces into the silence, "you know I think you're great, buddy, but sometimes I wonder where you come up with this stuff."

Will ignores him. He's staring at the body. The theatrical recreation of it all, except for that one imperfect detail.

Behind him, Beverly says, "Should we be looking for more missing organs, like last time."

"You won't find any," Will says idly. "He wanted our attention here."

"Okay, but isn't this just what you wrote?" Zeller says, setting the arm down atop the gurney carefully. "Why did he take something from the last body, and not from this one?"

"Fishing wire," Will says. Everybody stares at him. Clarifying, Will adds, "In my book, she's stitched with fishing wire, just like she's tied. He stitched her with yarn instead. He wanted us to pay attention to *this."*

"Maybe he just didn't have enough fishing wire on hand?" Zeller offers.

Will doesn't deign that with a response.

"Look," Jack says, "this is a pretty different MO from the last kill, isn't it? Are we certain it's the same guy?"

Will nearly doesn't deign that with a response either. "How many copycats do you think my work has, Jack?"

"One would have been enough for most people," Beverly says. "If you're already at two, three doesn't seem any more improbable."

Will sighs, tearing his eyes away from the corpse and stepping back. "The last time, he took a kidney. This time, he took only what was scripted, but he wanted us to pay special attention to it. That's important."

"What do a kidney and some bones have in common?" Price asks. "Other than the obvious, I mean."

"The Ripper takes trophies," Zeller says, darting a glance at Jack. When Jack doesn't correct him, he continues, "So it'd fit with his pattern. If you had the killer take these bones in the book, it was basically a free pass for him."

Will grits his teeth. "If it was as simple as just taking trophies, he wouldn't draw attention to it like this," he insists. "He wants us to think about it. What do you do with bones?"

"Uh, I put them in the compost pile for my garden, but if you mean what would a *serial killer* do with bones, I don't know, maybe make a display of them?" Beverly offers.

“You could make a knife with a bone handle,” Price says, sounding more curious than concerned. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen it.”

As much as he appreciates the team taking him seriously, none of it rings right. Will shakes his head, racking his brain for something - *anything* - that fits. He thinks not just of the previous copycat kill, but of the Ripper, too. Tries to make sense of the patterns of it all.

His eyes tick back to the corpse. Her missing jaw. The split arm, empty beneath the sagging stitches.

A buck flashes through Will’s memories - its dead eyes watching as Will cracked its blackened bones between his teeth. The stink of fresh marrow as it melted atop his tongue.

Fuck. *Fuck.* What had Hannibal said on the phone earlier?

Will swallows. “There is little that life provides that can’t be transformed.”

“Will?” Jack asks. “Did you say something?”

Finally, Will tears his eyes from the corpse. “The Ripper doesn’t take trophies - he takes ingredients.”

Silence hits like a bomb drop. Jack says, “Do you mean -”

“Yeah,” Will says. “Whoever he is, he’s *eating* them.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you know it's been five years since I updated this fic? Wow.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will calls Hannibal to pick him up from the crime scene. He has to. The officer who'd given Will a lift has long since vanished and Jack is too wrapped up in the investigation to spare any manpower to ferry Will to safety. In the face of all that, Will's options for escape had been woefully limited.

Will sits on the porch and watches wearily as Hannibal's Bentley rolls to a smooth stop just outside the crimetape. Hannibal steps out of the car, dressed in a coat that looks like it cost more than Will's house. He converses shortly with the officer guarding the driveway and is waved through without Will having to do anything at all. Trust Hannibal Lecter to talk his way into a crime scene without any effort whatsoever.

"What did you say to him?" Will asks as Hannibal comes to a stop in front of him. "To be let through, I mean. You could have been a reporter."

"I told him that my partner is part of the team here, and he called me to take him home," Hannibal says without skipping a beat. He reaches out, pressing the backs of his fingers to Will's cheek. "How long have you been sitting out here, Will?"

The word 'partner' is pounding in Will's heart, turning all the blood in his veins white hot. Rather than acknowledge that, Will shrugs awkwardly, folding his arms atop his knees. "I don't know. Came out when the arguing inside started getting too loud."

Right on cue, Jack thunders, *"Could have learnt this years ago now!"*

Will winces, but Hannibal's expression doesn't change, glancing over Will's shoulder with a raised brow. "Better the cold than the fury?"

"Close enough," Will says and heaves himself to his feet. "Can we get out of here now?"

Before Hannibal can reply, the heavy thud of footsteps emerges from the house, and Will closes his eyes and prays for strength from a God he doesn't believe in.

"We're heading back to Quantico," Jack announces. "You can ride with me, Will."

"You don't need me back at Quantico," Will says. "I've told you before, there's nothing more you'll find during the autopsy that I can help you with."

"You promised me you'd look at the last one," Jack counters. "Might as well do two at once."

Will can't think of anything he wants to do less right now. His mind is still caught in the foyer of the fancy house, the eyes of a dead woman staring at his feet in silent worship, the ghost of bones crunching between his teeth. He thinks if he has to stand by and watch a body

be cut open right now, organs weighed and bagged like they're set to be wrapped in butcher's paper, he might lose it entirely.

Behind him, Hannibal steps forward, setting a gentle hand on Will's shoulder. "I believe Will has given you enough of his time today," he says.

Jack's gaze snaps to him. "And who might you be?"

Hannibal smiles pleasantly and offers his spare hand. "Doctor Hannibal Lecter. I believe we've talked on the phone previously."

Realization dawns in Jack's eyes. "You're Will's alibi."

"I'm Will's partner," Hannibal corrects, and hearing him say it the second time doesn't feel any more real than the first. "The alibi is more or less incidental."

Jack's expression turns contemplative, his gaze flicking between Hannibal and Will. Will has no clue what his expression is, but he hopes it's nowhere near as conflicted as he feels. "Is that so?"

"Indeed," Hannibal says. "Now, if you excuse us, I believe Will could use some rest away from dead bodies and the like."

Will expects Jack to object still, but he keeps silent, watching as Hannibal guides Will from the porch and down to his car. Will can feel the press of Jack's gaze the whole way, but he's too emotionally exhausted to do anything about it. He even manages to keep from rolling his eyes when Hannibal holds open the passenger side door for him.

"I'm not an invalid, you know," he says as he sinks down into the warmth of the car.

"I never implied you were," Hannibal says as he turns the heaters on, both aimed in Will's direction despite the fact he'd never been all that cold to begin with. "Regardless, a little care can never go amiss in scenarios like this."

"And what scenarios would those be?" Will asks.

The car comes to life with a smooth pur and Hannibal deftly navigates them down the street packed with police cruisers and rubberneckers. "Finding you adrift in a sea of blood," Hannibal says.

Despite himself, Will can't help but snort, rubbing a hand over his face. "Adrift, maybe. Not enough blood to be a sea of it. Not any blood at all, really. Ripper's too clever for that, after all."

The car goes quiet for a minute, and then Hannibal prompts, "The Ripper?"

Will's stomach flips. Fuck. He hadn't thought to check those words at his brain before they promptly vacated his mouth. "I mean - shit. We don't know anything for sure yet, it's just a theory."

“Your theory, or Jack Crawford’s theory?” Hannibal asks.

Will chances a glance at him from the corner of his eye. Hannibal’s attention is on the road in front of him, hands loose on the steering wheel. If he’s at all distressed by the mention of Baltimore’s most notorious serial killer, he does an admirable job hiding it. “Does it matter?”

“To me, certainly,” Hannibal says.

Will can’t fathom why. He glances down at his lap. There’s a grease stain on the knee of his jeans. Will runs his thumbnail, feeling the coarse grain of the denim. He’d thought he’d have time to change before seeing Hannibal this evening. He’d never have worn this out of the house otherwise. Definitely not to the dinner he’d been hoping might be a prelude to something else. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I think it’s the Ripper.” Will swallows. “You sure you wanna keep spending time with me now?”

It’s quiet but for the click of Hannibal flicking on his indicator as they turn into his posh neighborhood. Will turns away, watching the houses flitter by rather than looking at Hannibal’s reaction. They pull into his driveway, and Will reaches down to undo his seatbelt only for Hannibal to reach out and still his hand, making him glance up.

“Will,” Hannibal says, expression soft and serious, “it would matter not to me if the devil himself was chasing after you, I’d still ask for the favor of your company all the same.”

Will stares at him. He feels burning warm all over, a crawl of dynamite heat from the ignition point of Hannibal’s fingers atop his. Hannibal has to be the only man alive who can say something like that so *genuinely* and not sound corny while doing it. “Jesus. That’s one hell of a line, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiles at him, flashing his crooked teeth as he leans back and out of Will’s space. “It’s not a line, I’m afraid, just the insipid musings of a very besotted man.”

Will turns away, trying to hide the reddened tips of his ears. “Come on, we’re going to freeze out here.”

Inside, Hannibal takes his coat and ushers Will into his study with a sturdy hand resting between his shoulders. Will leans into it and allows himself to be led, glad to be relieved of the burden of making his own choices, if only for a moment. “Take a seat, please, I’ll bring us something warm to drink,” Hannibal says.

Will sinks into an armchair. “Coffee?”

Hannibal gives him an assessing look. “I think perhaps caffeine would be a bad choice for you right now.”

“You don’t think caffeine makes a good chaser for murder?” Will asks wryly.

Rather than reply to that, Hannibal says, “Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

Will doesn’t think admitting he never eats breakfast will go over particularly well. “Uhh…”

“Something to eat too, I think,” Hannibal says mildly, and heads in the direction of the kitchen. Will knows better than to argue with him by now, so he sags into his chair, allowing his eyes to drift closed as he waits. Maybe he should offer to help Hannibal - that’d certainly be the polite thing - but he’s had an emotionally draining morning, and right now the silence of Hannibal’s study is working at unraveling some of the tension from between his shoulders.

With his eyes closed, the Ripper’s latest kill returns to him, painted in vicious detail in his mind’s eyes. The corpse dangling from the bannister, the arms barred for contemplation. The eyes directed deliberately downwards, a supplicant raised to the height of a deity.

Will’s Ravenstag killed from a place of malice. Garrett Jacob Hobbs killed from a place of love. The Ripper kills from a place untouched by either of those. Despite the eerie precision of his mimicry, the cultivated talent from what is clearly *decades* of honing his skills, the feeling Will gets from his skills is nothing so mundane.

Derision. Disdain. *Amusement.*

The Ripper’s kills aren’t about the victims. They’re about the art they make.

Something touches Will’s shoulder and he snaps back to awareness, blinking up at Hannibal’s concerned expression. He’s looming in front of him, a teacup and saucer delicately held in each hand and a small platter of pastries set on the table next to him. Will hadn’t heard him approach at all. “Will? Are you alright?”

Will grimaces, pinching at the bridge of his nose and nearly upsetting his glasses. “Jesus, sorry, sorry. I just got caught up in my head for a minute. You startled me.”

“I assure you that was not my intention,” Hannibal says, and passes Will his drink.

“Yeah, well, make more noise when you walk maybe.” Will sets the saucer down and takes a careful drink from the cup. It’s tea, of course. Will’s not usually a tea drinker, but it’s just mild enough and sweet enough for him. “This is good, thanks.”

Hannibal sinks down into the chair beside him. “The leaves were a gift from a colleague. They should do more for your mental health than caffeine.”

Will’s not so sure, but he drinks it obediently, and, when Hannibal gives him a pointed look, plucks a flaky pastry from the plate beside him. It melts in his mouth, rich and buttery, and he struggles not to moan. “Did you bake these yourself?”

“Brioche is not so difficult,” Hannibal says. “My aunt taught me how to make it authentically when I lived with her as a youth, and it would be a shame to let such a skill waste.”

Will licks his fingertips. “You cook, you bake, you rescue me from the grips of Jack Crawford… is there anything you can’t do?”

Hannibal smiles at him. “I’m glad to do what I can to make your life easier,” he says. “Whether that be feeding you or saving you from crime scenes.”

Will doesn't point out that it hadn't been the crime scene that had distressed him so much as the crushing presence of Jack and his expectations. He glances away, down at the murky surface of his tea. On the drive here, he'd decided not to say anything, but now that he's sitting in the study, Hannibal doting on him like this, he finds himself wavering.

"You're retreating into your head again," Hannibal says, reaching out to set a hand on Will's arm. "I would rather you stay here with me, if it's all the same."

Hannibal's fingers on his arm feel unerringly heavy. Will's conscious of them to the point of distraction. He always is when Hannibal touches him.

Less than a week, he reminds himself. *You've had this for less than a week.*

He's in loath to risk it. Will's self-sabotage streak doesn't care.

Will swallows. He sets his teacup down. "You called me your partner."

Hannibal blinks at him. "Pardon?"

"At the crime scene earlier," Will clarifies. "You called me your partner. Twice."

Silence falls like a gavel. Hannibal's expression is absolutely indecipherable. His fingers part from Will's arms. "If I'm making your uncomfortable -"

"You're not," Will blurts, snagging Hannibal's hand before it can retreat too far. "I'm not - I'm not saying this right. I just meant, is that how you see me? Is that how you see us?"

Hannibal's fingers curl around his, warm from his tea. "I know we haven't been seeing each other long, but if it is for me to say, then yes, that's how I see us," he says carefully. "Of course, if you disagree, I apologize for my presumption."

Will glances down to his cup. "You're not being presumptuous."

A pause. When Hannibal speaks again, his voice has the hint of a smile to it. "I fear I am, but perhaps that is alright."

Will can't think of something more alright than that. "Yeah. Yeah it is."

Hannibal's expression softens, just ever so slightly. His hand withdraws, but the warmth of its touch lingers. "Drink your tea, Will."

Will does, hiding a smile in the rim of his cup. After a long moment, Will says, "I hope I didn't disrupt any of your plans today."

"You haven't," Hannibal says.

Will glances skeptically over his shoulder towards where an antique clock sets on the mantle. It reads just past twelve, the entire morning wasted to murder. "You don't have anything better to do at noon on a saturday?"

“No,” Hannibal says smoothly, climbing to his feet. “I do not.”

Will offers him his empty cup, balanced precariously on its saucer. “Not sure if I should believe that.”

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal says, reclaiming the set. “There is a small matter which I was hoping to attend. Perhaps you could help me.”

Will raises a brow. “Not sure how much help I’ll be, but sure.”

Hannibal flashes him a smile, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening. “I had some preparations left for dinner tonight. It would go much faster with a sous chef.”

A startled laugh breaks free and Will scuffs a hand over his face. “I’m not sure my involvement would make anything you cook go faster at all, and I suspect you know that.”

“Nevertheless, your company would only be an improvement.” This time, he holds out his hand to Will. “If you would permit it to me, of course.”

As if Hannibal isn’t perfectly aware that Will would permit him pretty much anything at this point. Trying to bite down on his hopelessly charmed smile, he takes Hannibal’s hand and allows himself to be drawn to his feet. “Yeah, Hannibal, I’ll permit you my company.”

--

Dinner preparation takes far longer than Will would have thought.

Hannibal sets him to work finely mincing fresh thyme and sage, and then once Will has filled a little glass bowl with it, talks him through thinly slicing some mushrooms too, a guiding hand on Will’s elbow to correct his posture when his rusty kitchen skills make an appearance.

“I did warn you that I wasn’t going to be good at this,” Will says as thin slices of mushroom fall from the blade into a tidy pile. “This would go a lot quicker without me mangling everything you give me to cut.”

“Nonsense,” Hannibal says, his chest pressed up against Will’s back, chin hovering over his shoulder. The heat of him turns Will’s stomach into knots, and it’s an effort to focus on the knife in his hands. “You’re doing wonderful, and there is nothing you can do with that blade that would displease me.”

Will slots him a wry look over his shoulder. “I’m sure I could find *something* to do with it that’d displease you. It’s pretty sharp, after all.”

When Hannibal smiles, the razor edges of his teeth flash. “As I said, Will.” Before Will can say anything else to that, he squeezes Will’s elbow gently, redirecting his attention to his task. “Not too thin, please. It’s a delicate balance.”

After the mushrooms, Hannibal takes over, stuffing the fruits of Will’s labor into two dewy hunks of meat he pulls from his refrigerator. Will stands in the corner, watching as Hannibal’s

deft surgeon hands hollows them, fingertips glossy with oil and sweet with herbs. “Is this what you were preparing when I called last night?”

“Pig heart,” Hannibal confirms for him, deftly tying some cooking twine around the slippery flesh. “Marinated in some red wine and rosemary.”

Will eyes it with interest. He’s never eaten much offal before, but even raw, he thinks he can see the appeal. The shape of Hannibal’s design coming together. “Do you ever eat something that you don’t have to spend all day preparing?”

Hannibal smiles at him as he adjusts the hearts in their roasting tray before turning to the sink to rinse his hands. “I find as much joy in the preparation of a meal as I do in consuming it. Of course, like everybody else, I do occasionally have days where my schedule or energy makes it impractical.”

Will looks him up and down. He can’t imagine Hannibal being exhausted. Even after days of tending to the ebb and flow of Will’s hectic life, he’s as put together as always; hair coiffed, sleeves neatly rolled up to bare his steady arms, waistcoat shucked to reveal a perfectly pressed button-up. He supposes years in medical school and even longer as a surgeon would have given Hannibal an enviable constitution. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Hannibal looks up from where he’s drying his hands on a kitchen towel. “I’m only human, Will,” he says, with evident amusement.

Will’s not so sure about that. Sometimes, he thinks he might have dreamt him. It wouldn’t be the first time, after all. The things he dreams never truly leave him. “Do you need my help with anything else?”

“Not for the moment. They’ll slow roast until dinner this evening. In the meantime, shall I tempt you with lunch?”

Will, who’s still full from the pastries and tea Hannibal pressed on him earlier, shakes his head. “I’m fine. Besides, if I’m staying here after dinner, I need to go back and check on my dogs.”

Hannibal looks doubtful, but to Will’s relief he doesn’t push. “Of course. Let me see you to the door.”

“I’ll even let you help me into my coat,” Will says dryly. “I know how happy it makes you to be given an excuse to touch me.”

Hannibal smiles again, in that amused eye-crinkling way of his. “Are we at the point where I still must fish for excuses?”

Will does his level best not to let the heat creeping up the back of his neck show. He has the impression he’s not successful. “I think you know we’re not.”

At the door, Hannibal indeed helps him into his coat, hands smoothing down Will’s lapels gently, and then tugging him a step nearer to press a kiss to the hinge of Will’s jaw. “At the

risk of upsetting your independent streak, may I ask you to text me once you're home safe?"

It probably says more than it should that it doesn't upset Will's independent streak at all. All the same, he fists his hands in Hannibal's shirt to hold him near, and says, "What do you imagine is going to happen to me between here and Wolftrap?"

"Given circumstances, I do not suppose my caution is without warrant," Hannibal replies, which, yeah, fair enough. His kisses Will again, properly this time, and steps back out of Will's grasp much to Will's displeasure. "I shall see you tonight, Will."

Will gives him a fond look. "You know you will."

Hannibal takes his hand, pressing one last kiss to Will's knuckles. "Come hungry."

--

Will survives the drive home without issue. He spends the whole hour drifting between the crime scene and anticipation of tonight to the point that the two events begin to merge in his mind. A sick combination of nerves and awe, although he can't tell which set of feelings belongs where.

He's so lost in his own head that it takes him a moment to notice the car wedged in his own driveway as he pulls up, but once he does his heart sinks. He'd recognize it anywhere, even after all this time. If he hadn't, the flash of bright red hair lurking by his door would have given it away. With a sigh, he takes a moment to shoot Hannibal a text, armours himself as best as he can, and heaves himself out into the bitter cold.

"Ms. Lounds," he says, crunching through the gravel and dirt to the porch. "I think you know you're not supposed to be here."

Freddie smiles at him brightly, straightening up from where she'd been slouching against Will's front door. Today, she's dressed in lace and leopard print, utterly out of place against the backdrop of Will's property. "Despite your threats, you never did file that restraining order, Will. As such, there's nothing saying that one colleague can't come check on another."

"We're not colleagues," Will snaps, stomping past her as he fishes his keys out. "And I know you're not here out of the kindness of your heart."

"I heard there was another murder," Freddie says cheerfully. "Another one of yours, I mean. I can only assume Crawford's already told you the details, so I'd like to get your perspective on it."

He turns to look at her incredulously. "In your last article you told everybody you thought I'd been the one to do it," he says. "And I've seen the headline of your newest one. *'Inside the carnage of Will Graham's mind'*. Really, Freddie?"

Her smile loses none of its luster, polished to perfection despite the cold-chapped flush to her skin from god knows how long waiting out here for Will to return. "Without an interview to go on, I have to work with what I've got. If you'd like to go on record -"

“Get off my property, Freddie,” Will says, shouldering his door open. “If I see you here or at the store again, I’m calling the goddamn police, and this time I *will* be getting a restraining order.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, but Will slams the door in her face. He stands there for a moment, hand pressed to the wood while his heart beats like a drum in his chest. After a long moment, he hears the sound of her car door opening, and then the grumble of her engine as she backs out and away, leaving Will to his peace at last.

He breathes out, turning around to see his pack gathered behind him in an array of confused bodies. He offers them a tentative smile. “Some guard dogs you are, huh? You couldn’t bark her away?” Winston tilts his head, ears flopping, and Will sighs again, bending down to press a kiss to his snout. “Yeah, yeah, you’re a big bad wolf, I see that.”

He takes a minute refreshing their food and water, dragging it out until he’s certain that Freddie can’t possibly be lurking around, and then cracks open his door to let them roam out into the yard. He stands there for a moment, watching them, before he retreats inside, pulling his phone free of his pocket as he mounts the stairs.

Abigail answers on the third ring. *“Will?”*

“Yeah, it’s me,” Will says, flinging open his wardrobe. “I wanted to check in on you.”

“I feel like I should be the one checking in on you,” she complains. *“You were the one dragged off to look at a dead body.”*

“It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve seen one,” Will says. He holds up a flannel to inspect in the watery afternoon light, grimaces at its frayed collar, and slots it back into place. “Are you at Marissa’s?”

“Her parents aren’t thrilled, but yeah. I probably shouldn’t stay here too long though, they pay her rent after all and I don’t want them to cut her off.”

“They won’t,” Will says with conviction. The next flannel he draws out is just as ragged as the first. Does he really not own anything his dogs haven’t chewed to hell and back? “They’re too protective of her.”

“Well, her apartment isn’t much bigger than mine, and I’m not going to crash on this couch forever,” Abigail says. *“Never mind me though, tell me more about Hannibal.”*

Will rolls his eyes. “Abigail.”

“Will.”

He sighs, sinking down onto his bed. “He’s been very good about this whole mess,” he says. “We’d had one date when the first body dropped and he barely even blinked.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

Will's not so sure. It *feels* good. Being with Hannibal feels almost *addictively* good. So good that it borders on dangerous. Will's smart enough to know that things that feel like that are rarely healthy. He's just not so sure he can make himself care.

"It's something," Will says. Then, "Freddie was here earlier, I want you to keep your eye out and be careful, okay? Call me if she starts harassing you again. I think I pissed her off earlier and I wouldn't put it past her to make it your problem."

Abigail makes a disgusted noise through the line. *"Are you sure Jack can't stop her from writing the shit she does?"*

"Unfortunately, there's not much Jack can do about free speech," Will says wryly. "Look, I have to go, I just wanted to check in and make sure you were alright."

"Go enjoy your date, Will," Abigail teases. *"I can take care of myself."*

Will rolls his eyes and hangs up. If she has enough energy to tease him, at least it seems like she's less anxious than she'd been this morning. Will takes the blessings he can get these days. He turns back to consider his wardrobe once more.

It's ridiculous to overthink this. Hannibal's certainly seen him in worse than a ratty flannel, guiding Will sweat soaked and shivering back to bed. All the same, he can't help but want to dress up for him - meet Hannibal on his level for a change instead of constantly dragging him down to Will's which is rife with dog hair and dirt.

After a more thorough investigation, he unearths a button-up from the back of his closet. No flannel, just a plain, deep red. Probably something he wore on a book tour back in the day, at his agent's behest. It's crumpled from lack of wear, but he takes it with him into the bathroom to hang from the door while he showers.

He takes his time, washing his hair and then lingering over the sink to tame his stubble. When he dresses, the shirt is a bit too big in the shoulders, stress evidently having sucked flesh from his bones over the years, but it's not something you'd notice without careful attention. He prays Hannibal won't, knowing he probably will.

Will packs an overnight bag, rounds his dogs inside, and pauses on the threshold with the bag slung over his shoulder, keys in his slack hand and breath fogging the air in front of him.

This morning he was looking at a body strung high like an angel and now he's on the way to his boyfriend's place to be cooked dinner and wooed. Either one of those events would feel surreal on their own - together they feel almost unbelievable.

Will isn't used to having anybody interested in him - and now he has both the Chesapeake Ripper and Hannibal Lecter. If asked, he's not sure he'd be able to say which one makes him feel more powerful.

Will grits his teeth against the hot rush of shame in his belly, locking his door in a hurry and tossing his bag into the backseat of the car as he slides behind the wheel.

No. Tonight he’s going to focus on nothing but Hannibal and himself. Nothing beyond his dinner table and his bedroom. Will’s history, his imagination, the Ripper - Will isn’t granting any of it space in his head, not tonight.

With a deep breath, Will stuffs down his sour thoughts and begins the long drive back to Baltimore.

Chapter End Notes

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